

Chapter 21: The South Asian Diaspora

Summary

Millions of people with roots in South Asia live outside the region, in places as different as Guyana, Fiji, Kenya, London, Dubai and the Twin Cities. This chapter explains what a diaspora is and follows the major waves of South Asian migration: indentured laborers sent to sugar colonies after slavery ended, workers and traders in East Africa, postwar migrants to Britain, workers in the oil-rich Gulf, and the long, uneven story of South Asians in the United States, from Punjabi farmers in California to families who arrived after 1965. It ends here at home, with Census numbers for Minnesota and a look at desi identity and families that live across borders.

Concepts Covered

1. Diaspora
2. Indentured Labor
3. Indo-Caribbean Communities
4. South Asians in East Africa
5. Uganda Expulsion of 1972
6. British South Asians
7. Gulf Migrant Workers

8. Remittances
9. Punjabi Pioneers in California
10. Bhagat Singh Thind Case
11. Immigration Act of 1965
12. South Asians in Minnesota
13. Model Minority Myth
14. Post-9/11 Backlash
15. Desi Identity
16. Transnational Families

Prerequisites

- **Chapter 1: What Is South Asia?** (the eight countries and the Indian Ocean)
- **Chapter 4: Colonialism, Independence, and Partition** (the British Empire and 1947)
- **Chapter 5: Faiths of South Asia** (Sikhism, Islam and Hinduism)
- **Chapter 20: Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives** (Nepal's remittances and Bhutanese refugees)

Every family has a moving story



Hi, it's Mora! If your family came from somewhere else, someone made a huge decision to leave home, and you are part of what happened next. This chapter helps you see your own family's move as one thread in a much bigger story, and it gives you the words to ask about it.

21.1 "Why Did You Come Here?"

It's a snowy Saturday, and Zara Hossain is at Ben Lindqvist's house for his grandmother's birthday. On the wall is a framed black-and-white photo of a farm couple standing beside a wooden house. "That's my great-great-grandparents," Ben says. "They came from Sweden in the 1880s. Grandma says they were poor and there wasn't enough land back home, so they came to Minnesota to farm."

Zara looks at the photo for a long time. She has heard bits of her own family's story: her parents grew up in Chattogram, Bangladesh, and moved to Minnesota in the 2000s, before she was born. But she has never asked the real questions. Why did they leave? Why Minnesota, of all places? Did they plan to stay forever?

That night at dinner, Zara asks her mother, "Why did you and Abbu come here?" Her mother laughs, then gets quiet, then says, "That's a long story. Ask Nanu about her brother first. He went to England before any of us left." Zara realizes her family's move was not one trip but part of a chain of moves, across generations and continents. How did so many South Asian families end up scattered around the world, and why did they go where they went?

21.2 What Is a Diaspora?

Start with something Ben already knows. Many Swedish and Norwegian immigrants settled in the Midwest, especially Minnesota, and their descendants still keep some traditions alive, in Lutheran churches, family recipes and places like the American Swedish Institute in Minneapolis. They are Americans, but many still feel a connection to the "old country." That's the basic idea of a diaspora.

A **diaspora** (*dye-AS-puh-ruh*) is a population that lives outside its ancestral homeland but keeps some connection to it, through memory, language, faith, food, family ties or a shared sense of identity. The word comes from Greek and means "scattering," like seeds thrown across a field. People with roots in all eight South Asian countries form diasporas around the world.

Why do people move? Historians often talk about **push factors** (things that push people out, such as poverty, war, persecution or lack of land) and **pull factors** (things that pull them in, such as jobs, schools, safety or family already there). Most migrations have both. Laws and empires matter too: who is allowed to move, and who is wanted.

South Asian migration came in **waves**, each with its own causes:

Wave	When	Where to	Main cause
Indenture	1830s to about 1920	Caribbean, Fiji, Mauritius, South Africa	Plantations needed labor after slavery was abolished
East Africa	Late 1800s onward	Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania	Railway work and trade under British rule
Early North America	About 1900 to 1917	California, the US West Coast, Canada	Farm, lumber and railway jobs
Britain	After 1947, especially 1950s to 1970s	British cities	Postwar labor shortages; Commonwealth ties

Wave	When	Where to	Main cause
The Gulf	1970s onward	Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar and neighbors	The oil boom
United States	After 1965	Cities and suburbs across the US	A new immigration law; jobs and study
Refugees	Many periods	Many countries	War, persecution, expulsion

Notice how many of these waves are tied to the British Empire. Britain ruled or controlled much of South Asia until 1947, and it also ran colonies in the Caribbean, Africa and the Pacific. Its ships, laws and labor needs moved South Asians around the world.

21.3 Indenture: The Sugar Ships

The first large wave began with the end of slavery. When Britain abolished slavery across its empire by an act of Parliament in 1833, plantation owners in sugar colonies such as British Guiana (now Guyana), Trinidad and Mauritius lost their enslaved workforce. They looked for a new source of cheap labor and found it in British India.

Indentured Labor was a system in which workers signed a contract, called an indenture, to work for a set number of years (usually five) on a plantation far from home, in return for passage, wages, housing and sometimes a return ticket. Indian workers called the contract *girmit*, their way of saying the English word "agreement," and the workers became known as *girmityas*.

On 29 January 1838, the ship *Hesperus* sailed from Calcutta (now Kolkata) with a sister ship, the *Whitby*. The *Hesperus* reached British Guiana on 5 May 1838 with 165 workers on board; thirteen others had died on the voyage. Guyanese still mark 5 May as Indian Arrival Day. Over the next eighty years, ships carried workers from the ports of Calcutta and Madras (now Chennai) to colonies across the world. Historians estimate that somewhere between about 1.3 million and more than 1.6 million South Asians went overseas under indenture before the system ended around 1920.

Destination	When indenture ran	Note
Mauritius	From 1834	Among the first and largest destinations
British Guiana (Guyana)	1838 to 1917	About 239,000 arrived
Trinidad	1845 to 1917	First ship, the <i>Fatel Razack</i> , on 30 May 1845; about 147,600 arrived
Fiji	1879 to 1916	First ship, the <i>Leonidas</i> , on 14 May 1879
Also	1800s to early 1900s	South Africa (Natal), Suriname, Jamaica and other colonies

Many recruits came from poor villages in what are now the Indian states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, and others from the south. Some joined to escape poverty; many were misled by recruiters with false promises, and some were kidnapped outright. Colonial officials called it "free" migration, but conditions

on the plantations were often harsh. Public outrage in India and Britain over abuses helped end the system: Fiji stopped indenture in 1916, and all remaining contracts there were cancelled on 1 January 1920.

Was it a choice?



Workers signed contracts, so planters called indenture "free labor." Critics at the time called it a new form of slavery, and historians still debate how similar the two were. To me, "signing" doesn't mean much when you're poor, far from home and can be jailed for quitting.

Indo-Caribbean Communities

Most indentured workers never went back. They stayed, saved, bought land, built temples and mosques, and raised families. **Indo-Caribbean Communities** are the descendants of these South Asian migrants living in the Caribbean, especially in Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago, and Suriname, where they are the largest ethnic group. In Guyana's 2012 census about 40% of people were Indo-Guyanese, and in Trinidad and Tobago's 2011 census about 35% were of Indian descent.

Indo-Caribbean culture is its own thing, not a copy of India. Over generations, families blended South Asian and Caribbean food, music, language and faith. Many Indo-Caribbeans are Hindu, many are Muslim and many are Christian. Trinidad marks Indian Arrival Day on 30 May.

Many Indo-Caribbean families have since moved again, especially to the New York area; since the 1960s a large community has grown in Richmond Hill, Queens, where a spring Phagwah (Holi) parade draws thousands of people each year. A person's family history might run from Bihar to Guyana

to Queens. The same pattern happened in Fiji, where many Indo-Fijians left after coups in 1987, and in Mauritius and South Africa.

21.4 East Africa

The Indian Ocean had linked South Asia and East Africa for a long time through trade carried by the monsoon winds (remember [Chapter 1](#)).

British colonial rule brought a much larger wave. Between 1896 and 1901, the British built the Uganda Railway, which ran from the port of Mombasa in Kenya inland to Lake Victoria. More than 30,000 workers were brought from British India to build it, many from Punjab and Gujarat. About 2,500 of them died, from disease, accidents and harsh conditions. Many who survived stayed when their contracts ended, and others followed as shopkeepers, clerks, craftspeople and civil servants.

South Asians in East Africa refers to the communities of Indian, and later Pakistani, origin that grew up in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania and neighboring countries from the late 1800s on. Under British rule they often held a middle position: below European officials, but in jobs, such as running shops and clerking, that many Africans were kept out of. That position helped some families prosper, and it also bred resentment that politicians would later use.

The Uganda Expulsion of 1972

The **Uganda Expulsion of 1972** was the forced removal of nearly all South Asians from Uganda by the military ruler Idi Amin, who announced on 4 August 1972 that they had 90 days to leave. About 80,000 people of South Asian descent lived in Uganda at the time, many of them born there. Amin accused them of disloyalty and of hurting the economy; their community leaders rejected those claims. Families had to abandon homes and businesses and could take very little with them.

Most held British passports from the colonial era, and around 28,000 went to the United Kingdom, where many first stayed in temporary resettlement camps. Thousands of others went to Canada, India, Kenya, Pakistan and elsewhere. Many rebuilt businesses and became well known in British towns such as Leicester. Uganda's later president, Yoweri Museveni, invited Asians to return, and some did.

Whose Story?

The Uganda expulsion is told very differently depending on who is telling it. In Britain it is often remembered as a story of welcome and success, with refugees who arrived with almost nothing and built successful businesses. But many families recall a colder arrival: the city council of Leicester even placed newspaper adverts in Uganda telling people not to come there. In Uganda, the expulsion is remembered as part of Amin's brutal rule, in which human rights groups estimate that somewhere between 100,000 and 500,000 Ugandans were killed, and a later president, Yoweri Museveni, encouraged Asians to come back. Some Ugandan Asians themselves remember Uganda as the only home they knew, and they don't describe it as "going back" to South Asia at all.

21.5 British South Asians

South Asians have lived in Britain for centuries. Sailors called *lascars*, many from Sylhet (in today's Bangladesh), worked on British ships and some settled in port cities. Students, servants and a few wealthy visitors came during colonial rule.

The big wave came after 1947. **British South Asians** are people in the United Kingdom with roots in South Asia, a community that grew sharply after independence when Britain needed workers to rebuild after World War II. As

Commonwealth citizens, people from India and Pakistan could come fairly easily, and many did in the 1950s and 1960s:

- **From Pakistan**, many came from Mirpur, in Pakistani-administered Kashmir, after the Mangla Dam, built in the 1960s, flooded villages and displaced tens of thousands. Others came from Punjab. Many worked in the textile mills of Lancashire and Yorkshire and in factories in the Midlands.
- **From India**, many came from Punjab and Gujarat, and others arrived later by way of East Africa, especially after the Uganda expulsion.
- **From Bangladesh**, most came from the Sylhet region, with migration peaking in the 1970s. Many settled in East London's Tower Hamlets, around Brick Lane, and Sylheti families opened many of the restaurants Britons call "Indian."

Britain began restricting Commonwealth immigration with the Commonwealth Immigrants Act of 1962, which allowed in mainly people with limited work vouchers, and families who came to join relatives. Many communities faced racism, including violent attacks, and organized to fight it.

Today, British South Asians are one of the largest groups in Britain. In the 2021 Census of England and Wales:

Group	Number (2021)	Share of population
Indian	1,864,304	3.1%
Pakistani	1,587,822	2.7%
Bangladeshi	644,900	1.1%

British South Asians include members of Parliament, doctors, business owners, artists and athletes, and British culture has absorbed South Asian food, music and words. Zara's great-uncle, the one who went to England, is part of this story.

21.6 The Gulf: Workers and Money Home

In the 1970s, oil prices shot up and the countries of the Persian Gulf, such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Kuwait, Qatar, Oman and Bahrain, became very rich very fast. They needed workers to build roads, airports, hospitals and whole new cities, and to staff homes, shops and offices.

Gulf Migrant Workers are people from South Asia and other regions who go to work in the Gulf states, usually on temporary contracts, without the chance to become citizens. The wave started in the 1970s and has never stopped. Between 1972 and 1983, mass migration from the Indian state of Kerala to the Gulf was so large that it is called the "Kerala Gulf Boom." Workers also come in large numbers from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka. Indians are the largest national group in the UAE.

Life for Gulf workers varies hugely. Some are engineers, doctors and bankers with good salaries. Many more are construction workers, drivers, domestic workers and cleaners. In most Gulf states, a sponsorship system called *kafala* has tied a worker's job and legal residence to one employer, giving employers great power. The International Labour Organization and rights groups have warned that this leaves many workers, especially domestic workers, with weak protections. Some countries, such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia, have made reforms in recent years, which critics say are not always enforced.

Don't flatten Gulf workers into one story



It's easy to picture Gulf migration as only hardship or only riches. In real families it's usually both: a father missing his kids' childhood while his salary pays for their school. Ask before you assume.

Remittances

Remittances are money that migrants send home to their families. Gulf workers send much of their pay home, and so do South Asians in Britain, the US and everywhere else. That money pays for food, school fees, weddings, medical care and new houses, and it adds up to very large sums.

Country	Remittances received, 2025 (World Bank)
India	about US\$150.7 billion, the most of any country in the world
Pakistan	about US\$40.5 billion
Bangladesh	about US\$33.9 billion
Nepal	about US\$14.7 billion, equal to about 32% of Nepal's GDP

You read in **Chapter 20** how important remittances are to Nepal.

21.7 South Asians in the United States

Punjabi Pioneers in California

Many people think South Asians first came to the US in the 1960s. They didn't. **Punjabi Pioneers in California** were the South Asian men, mostly Sikhs from Punjab, who came to the US West Coast in the early 1900s to work in mills, on railways and on farms, and who later farmed in California's agricultural valleys.

They faced hostility from the start. On 4 September 1907, a mob in Bellingham, Washington, attacked and drove out South Asian mill workers. Newspapers called them "Hindus," even though most were Sikh. In 1912 the pioneers founded a gurdwara in Stockton, California, the first Sikh house of worship in the US. The Immigration Act of 1917 then created an "Asiatic Barred Zone" that banned new immigrants from British India, Afghanistan and much of Asia.

Because almost no South Asian women could come, and because California law banned marriages between people labeled as different races, many Punjabi men married Mexican and Mexican American women who worked beside them in the fields. Almost 400 of these Punjabi-Mexican couples lived in California's farm valleys, raising children who spoke Spanish and English and ate both roti and tortillas.

The Bhagat Singh Thind Case

The Bhagat Singh Thind Case (*United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind*, 1923) was a US Supreme Court decision that ruled South Asians were not "white persons" and therefore could not become naturalized citizens. At the time, US law allowed only "free white persons" and people of African descent to naturalize.

Bhagat Singh Thind was a Sikh man born in Punjab who served in the US Army during World War I. He argued that, as an Indian of "Aryan" descent, he counted as Caucasian and therefore white. On 19 February 1923 the Court unanimously rejected his claim, saying the law used "white" in its everyday

meaning, not a scientific one. After the decision, the government moved to strip citizenship from many South Asians who had already naturalized, and it left them barred from owning farmland under California's 1913 Alien Land Law, which applied to immigrants "ineligible for citizenship."

The ruling stood for more than twenty years. Thind himself became a citizen in 1936 under a law for World War I veterans. In 1946 the Luce-Celler Act finally let Indians naturalize, with an immigration quota of just 100 people a year. One person who benefited was Dalip Singh Saund, a Punjabi farmer and judge in California, who in 1956 became the first Indian American, and the first Sikh, elected to the US Congress.

The Immigration Act of 1965

The **Immigration Act of 1965** (the Immigration and Nationality Act, also called the Hart-Celler Act) was a US law, signed by President Lyndon Johnson at the Statue of Liberty on 3 October 1965, that ended the "national origins" quota system, which had heavily favored immigrants from northern and western Europe since the 1920s. The new system gave preference to people with family already in the US and to people with skills the country needed.

The effect on South Asian immigration was huge. Doctors, engineers, scientists and students came first, and then their spouses, parents and siblings through family reunification. Later decades brought more varied arrivals: taxi drivers and shop owners as well as tech workers, refugees from Bhutan and Afghanistan, and students from every South Asian country.

This is how big South Asian American communities were in 2023, according to Pew Research Center fact sheets based on Census data:

Origin	Population in the US (2023, Pew)
Indian	about 5.2 million
Pakistani	about 680,000
Bangladeshi	about 300,000
Nepalese	about 225,000
Sri Lankan	about 85,000
Bhutanese	about 20,000

Indian Americans are the second-largest Asian origin group in the US, about 21% of all Asian Americans. Most South Asian Americans are immigrants or children of immigrants: 66% of Indian Americans and 71% of Bangladeshi Americans were born abroad (2023, Pew).

The Model Minority Myth

The **Model Minority Myth** is the stereotype that Asian Americans, including South Asian Americans, are all successful, wealthy, highly educated and free of problems, often used to compare them favorably with other minority groups. It is called a myth because it hides real differences and real struggles.

Look at Pew's numbers (2023 data, published 2025):

Group	Median household income	Share living in poverty
Indian Americans	about \$151,200	6%
Nepalese Americans	about \$94,800	9%
Bangladeshi Americans	about \$78,400	14%
All Asian Americans	about \$105,600	10%

Bangladeshi-headed households earned roughly half as much as Indian-headed ones. Behind any average are taxi drivers, restaurant workers and families just getting by, as well as doctors and engineers.

The myth causes harm in several ways. It makes struggling students feel invisible or ashamed to ask for help. It pressures teens toward a few "approved" careers. It ignores how the 1965 law selected for highly educated immigrants, which explains part of the success story. And it is used to pit Asian Americans against Black and Latino Americans, as if each group's outcomes were only about effort.

Post-9/11 Backlash

After the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, many South Asian, Arab and Muslim Americans faced a wave of hatred. **Post-9/11 Backlash** refers to the hate crimes, harassment, profiling and discrimination aimed at people perceived as Muslim or Middle Eastern after the attacks, including many South Asians.

The first killing reported as revenge for the attacks happened on 15 September 2001, in Mesa, Arizona. Balbir Singh Sodhi, a Sikh immigrant who owned a gas station, was shot and killed by a man who wanted revenge for 9/11 and who profiled him as an Arab Muslim because of his turban and beard. Sodhi was not Muslim, and he had nothing to do with the attacks, which shows how hatred lumped together people of different faiths and backgrounds. FBI data show that reported anti-Islamic hate crime incidents jumped from 28 in 2000 to 481 in 2001, and attacks on people because of their ethnicity, including South Asians, also rose sharply.

Many communities responded by organizing. The Sikh Coalition, for example, was formed by volunteers on the night of 11 September 2001 to defend Sikh Americans' civil rights, and Sodhi's family later gave one of his turbans to the Smithsonian's 9/11 collection. Many teens today hear about this period from their parents, who remember changing how they dressed, or being stopped at airports again and again.

21.8 South Asians in Minnesota

Now bring it home. **South Asians in Minnesota** are the residents of Minnesota with roots in South Asia, a community that today includes families from every South Asian country, with temples, mosques, gurdwaras, cultural associations and student clubs across the Twin Cities and beyond.

How many are there? The best source is the US Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS). Here are its estimates for Minnesota, averaged over 2020 to 2024 (the most recent five-year data available in October 2026):

Group (Census label)	Estimate in Minnesota, 2020–2024 ACS	Margin of error
Asian Indian	52,192	± 2,528
Pakistani	3,613	± 964
Nepalese	3,023	± 707
Bangladeshi	1,935	± 572
Sri Lankan	1,927	± 598
Afghan (listed by the Census as Central Asian)	1,380	± 719
Bhutanese	694	± 710

Add the South Asian groups and you get about 64,000 people, a little over 1% of Minnesota's roughly 5.7 million residents (US Census Bureau, ACS 2020–2024, table B02018).

How to read a Census table



That "±" is the margin of error: the Census surveys a sample, not everyone, so small groups have big uncertainty. A person who checks two groups is counted in both, and someone who writes "Punjabi" or "Sikh" might be counted differently from their cousin, so treat these numbers as good estimates, not exact headcounts.

Minnesota's South Asian community includes people who came for work or study, Nepali, Bhutanese and Afghan families, and second- and third-generation teens like Zara and Nima. Ask around your school and you'll likely find families from several of the eight countries.

21.9 Desi Identity and Transnational Families

Desi Identity

You've probably heard the word *desi*. In Bangla it's *দেশি* (*DAY-shee*), and in Hindi *देसी* (*DAY-see*); both come from *desh*, "homeland" or "country," the word you met in Chapter 1. **Desi Identity** is the shared sense of belonging that many people of South Asian heritage, especially in the diaspora, express with the word "desi," meaning roughly "one of us, from back home."

In the diaspora, people from different countries, faiths and languages often discover they have a lot in common: similar foods, film songs, cricket and big family weddings. A Pakistani kid and an Indian kid in Minnesota may feel closer to each other than either expected. Many South Asian student clubs, like Zara's, are built on that shared desi feeling.

But "desi" doesn't fit everyone the same way. Some Afghans, Nepalis, Sri Lankans, Bhutanese and Maldivians don't use the word for themselves. Many Indo-Caribbean people have their own words and traditions. A good club makes room for people to name themselves.

Transnational Families

Transnational Families are families whose members live in two or more countries but stay closely connected, sharing money, decisions, care and daily life across borders. Many South Asian diaspora families live this way. A grandmother in Dhaka joins dinner every night by video call. A cousin in

Dubai sends money for a sister's wedding in Kerala. Parents in Minnesota debate whether to retire "back home." Teens spend summers with grandparents in Lahore or Kathmandu.

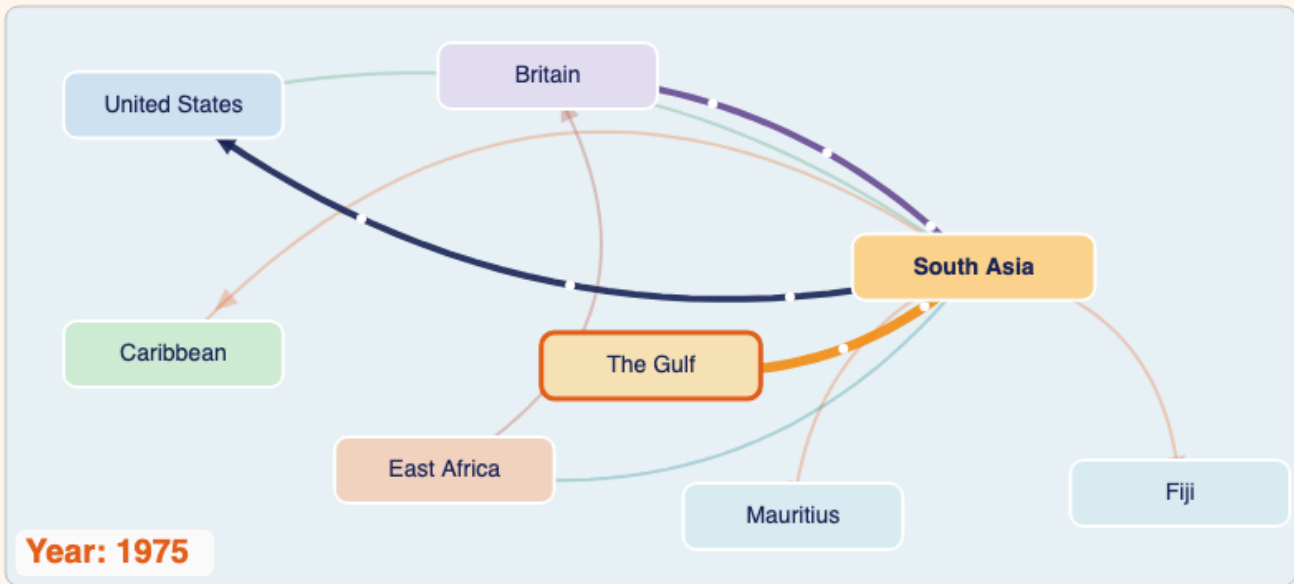
Living across borders brings both strength and strain. Families keep languages and traditions alive, and they can help each other in a crisis. But they also miss weddings and funerals, worry about relatives far away, and sometimes feel they don't fully belong in either place. Zara feels that when she answers her Nanu in English. Many second-generation teens describe it as being "too South Asian" in one place and "too American" in the other, and then slowly building an identity that is fully both.

Back at dinner, Zara's mother finally tells the story. Nanu's brother went to London in the 1970s and worked in a restaurant. Years later, he helped Zara's father get a student visa, and her parents chose Minnesota because a friend from Chattogram already lived here and said the schools were good. "So it was a chain," Zara says. "Everyone pulled the next person." Her mother nods. "That's how it always works."

Diagram: Migration Waves

Migration Waves

Press Play or drag the year. Tap a region to read about its wave.



Schematic map, not to scale. Not an official depiction of borders.

The Gulf (1970s to today)

Why: The oil boom: Gulf states needed builders, drivers, nurses, engineers and domestic workers.

Fact: Remittances to India were about US\$150.7 billion in 2025, the most of any country (World Bank).

Active in 1975: Britain, The Gulf, United States after 1965

Play

Reset

The Gulf

[Back to Migration Waves Lesson Plan](#)

Interactive simulation: <https://aaryavvatts-lab.github.io/south-asian-culture-textbook/sims/ch21-migration-waves/main.html>

Open the Migration Waves fullscreen

MicroSim specification: Migration Waves

sim-id: ch21-migration-waves

Library: p5.js

Status: Implemented

Bloom Level: Understand

Bloom Verb: identify, explain

Learning Objective: The learner will identify the major waves of South Asian migration (indenture, East Africa, early North America, Britain, the Gulf and the post-1965 United States) and explain the main cause of each.

Canvas: responsive width; 670 px drawing area plus 90 px control area.

Controls: Play / Pause button, Reset button, year slider (1830 to 2020), wave menu; click or tap a region tile.

Behavior: Labeled region tiles (not a real map) surround a central South Asia tile. As the year changes, arcs light up for waves active that year and stay faintly visible after they end; a secondary arc shows the 1972 move from East Africa to Britain. Selecting a wave shows a card with its dates, cause and one sourced fact. The timeline starts paused. The caption "Schematic map, not to scale. Not an official depiction of borders." is drawn in the drawing area.

Press **Play** and watch the arcs appear as the years pass. Pause at 1850, 1910, 1960, 1980 and 2010, and list which waves are active each time. Then click each tile to read why people went there.

Notice how the causes change: plantations and empire in the 1800s, railways and trade around 1900, rebuilding Britain after 1947, oil money after the 1970s, and a new US law in 1965. Notice too that some arcs don't start in South Asia at all, like the one from East Africa to Britain in 1972. The tiles are not a map, so distances and positions are only rough.

Ask Your Elders

Your interview for this chapter

Talk with a parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle, family friend or community elder about how and why your family (or theirs) moved: when they came, what the first weeks were like, what they brought and what they miss. If you don't have a South Asian elder to ask, interview a club advisor, a local temple, mosque, gurdwara or cultural center volunteer, or a classmate's family (with permission). Ten minutes is enough.

Before you start: Ask if they would like to look at an old passport, ticket, photo or letter together. Objects bring back memories. Ask before you take notes or record.

Questions to ask

1. Where were you living before you moved, and what was a normal day like there?
2. Why did you decide to leave? Was there one moment when you knew you were going?
3. Why here? Did you know anyone in this country or city before you came?
4. What do you remember about your first weeks: the weather, the food, school or work, people who helped?
5. What did you bring with you, and what do you wish you had brought? How has your connection to back home changed over the years?
6. What part of where you came from do you hope I'll keep?

Listen for: push and pull factors behind their move; links to a wave in this chapter, such as the Immigration Act of 1965, Gulf Migrant Workers or British

South Asians; and signs of Transnational Families, such as Remittances, video calls or relatives in several countries.

Save it: Write down one quote or story in their words, with their permission. If they agree, you can share it with the [Roots & Rivers Story Archive](#).

? Your turn: compare two answers

Compare your elder's migration story with one of the waves in this chapter. Which push and pull factors match, and which are unique to your family? If a friend interviewed someone who came at a different time or from a different country, list two ways their stories differ and one way they're the same.

"Every family does it a little differently, and there is no wrong answer here."

Common Misconceptions

Myth: South Asians only came to the US after 1965.

Reality: Punjabi Sikh workers came to the US West Coast in the early 1900s, founded a gurdwara in Stockton in 1912 and farmed in California for decades. Laws in 1917 and the 1923 Thind decision then shut most South Asians out until the 1940s and 1960s.

Myth: All South Asian Americans are doctors or engineers, and they're all well off.

Reality: That's the model minority myth. In 2023, the median household income of Bangladeshi Americans was about half that of Indian Americans, and 14% of Bangladeshi Americans lived in poverty (Pew). South Asian Americans work in every kind of job.

Myth: Indenture was just voluntary migration for better jobs.

Reality: Workers did sign contracts, but many were poor, misled by recruiters

and bound by laws that made quitting a crime. Critics at the time compared it to slavery, and historians still debate how similar the two systems were.

Myth: The South Asian diaspora is all Indian.

Reality: There are large Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities in Britain, Nepali and Bangladeshi workers in the Gulf, Sri Lankan Tamil communities in Canada, and Afghan, Bhutanese and Nepali families in the US, including in Minnesota.

Check Yourself

? 1. What is a diaspora? ✓

A diaspora is a population living outside its ancestral homeland that keeps some connection to it, through family, faith, language, food or shared identity. The word comes from Greek for "scattering."

? 2. Why did British sugar colonies start recruiting indentured workers from India in the 1830s? ✓

Britain abolished slavery across its empire, so plantation owners lost their enslaved workforce and turned to contract workers from British India.

? 3. What happened in Uganda in 1972? ✓

Idi Amin gave about 80,000 people of South Asian descent 90 days to leave the country. Around 28,000 went to Britain, and others went to Canada, India and elsewhere.

? 4. What did the Supreme Court decide in the Bhagat Singh Thind case? ✓

In 1923 it ruled unanimously that South Asians were not "white persons" under US law and so could not become naturalized citizens. Many who had already naturalized lost their citizenship.

? 5. What are remittances, and why do they matter to countries like Nepal? ✓

Remittances are money migrants send home. In 2025 they equaled about 32% of Nepal's GDP (World Bank), so they pay for food, schooling and housing for many families.

Exercises

Remember

1. List three destinations of Indian indentured laborers and the year indenture began in one of them.

Answer ✓

Any three of: Mauritius (from 1834), British Guiana/Guyana (1838), Trinidad (1845), Fiji (1879), South Africa, Suriname, Jamaica.

2. What did the Immigration Act of 1965 end, and who signed it?

Answer

It ended the national origins quota system that favored northern and western European immigrants. President Lyndon Johnson signed it on 3 October 1965.

Understand

1. Explain why many Punjabi men in early 1900s California married Mexican and Mexican American women.

Answer

Almost no South Asian women could immigrate, and California law banned marriages between people labeled as different races. Mexican and Mexican American women often worked beside Punjabi men in the fields, and those marriages were allowed.

2. Explain why the model minority myth is called a myth.

Answer

It hides big differences between groups and families, such as the gap in income and poverty between Indian and Bangladeshi Americans, and it ignores how US immigration law selected highly educated immigrants. It also harms people who struggle and is used to compare minority groups unfairly.

Apply

1. Use the Migration Waves sim. Set the year to 1975 and list every wave that is active. For each one, name the main cause. *Hint: some waves had ended by then but still show faintly.*
2. A classmate's grandparents came to Britain from Mirpur in the 1960s. Using this chapter, explain what push and pull factors might have shaped their move. *Hint: think about the Mangla Dam and Britain's labor needs.*

Analyze

1. Compare indentured laborers in the 1800s with Gulf migrant workers today. What is similar about their situations, and what is different? *Hint: think about contracts, citizenship, money sent home and freedom to change jobs.*
2. Analyze the Minnesota table in Section 21.8. Why might the Bhutanese estimate be less reliable than the Asian Indian estimate, and what could cause someone to be counted in two groups? *Hint: look at the margins of error and Mora's tip.*

Evaluate

1. The word "desi" brings many people together, but not everyone uses it. Should a South Asian student club call itself a "desi club"? Evaluate both sides and give your recommendation. *Hint: think about Nepali, Afghan, Sri Lankan and Indo-Caribbean members.*
2. Britain often remembers the arrival of Ugandan Asians as a success story. Using the Whose Story? box, evaluate whether that version is complete. *Hint: consider Leicester's adverts and the refugees' own memories.*

Create

1. Create a one-page "family migration map" for your family or an interviewee: a schematic drawing (not an official map) showing each move, its year and one push and one pull factor. *Hint: use arrows and labeled boxes, like the Migration Waves sim.*
2. Write a short letter (150 to 200 words) from a fictional teen in a transnational family, for example a girl in Minnesota writing to her cousin in Dhaka, describing one way their lives are connected and one way they feel different. *Hint: use at least two concept words from this chapter.*

Key Takeaways

- A diaspora is a scattered population that keeps ties to its homeland; South Asians from all eight countries form diasporas worldwide.
- After Britain abolished slavery, about 1.3 to 1.6 million South Asians went overseas as indentured laborers from the 1830s to about 1920, creating Indo-Caribbean, Indo-Fijian and other communities.
- South Asians built and traded in East Africa from the late 1800s; in 1972 Idi Amin expelled about 80,000 from Uganda, and around 28,000 went to Britain.
- British South Asians grew after 1947; in 2021 about 1.86 million Indian, 1.59 million Pakistani and 645,000 Bangladeshi people lived in England and Wales.
- The 1970s oil boom drew millions of South Asian workers to the Gulf, and remittances now total about US\$150.7 billion a year for India alone (2025, World Bank).
- In the US, Punjabi pioneers arrived around 1900, the 1923 Third decision blocked citizenship, and the 1965 Immigration Act opened the door to

today's large communities, which still face the model minority myth and faced a wave of post-9/11 hate.

- About 64,000 people in Minnesota belong to South Asian groups (ACS 2020–2024), and many live in transnational families that span continents.

You've traced the routes!



You now know the big waves that carried South Asians around the world, and where your own family's story might fit. In Chapter 22, we bring it all home: you'll turn your interviews into a real oral history project for your school or club.

Quiz: The South Asian Diaspora

Test your understanding of Chapter 21. Choose the best answer, then click **Show Answer** to check.

Question 1

Which description best fits the word "diaspora"?

- A. Any group of tourists visiting a foreign country
- B. A population living outside its ancestral homeland that keeps some connection to it
- C. People who move from a village to a city inside the same country
- D. A government program that sends workers abroad on contracts

? Show Answer



The correct answer is **B**. A diaspora lives outside its ancestral homeland but keeps ties to it through family, faith, language, food or identity. Moving from a village to a city inside one country is migration, but it does not create a diaspora, because people have not left the homeland.

Concept Tested: Diaspora **Bloom's Level:** Remember

Question 2

Why did plantation owners in British sugar colonies begin recruiting indentured workers from India in the 1830s?

- A. India's government asked Britain to send its farmers abroad
- B. Sugar prices had collapsed and planters wanted cheaper machines
- C. The workers were fleeing the Partition of India
- D. Britain had abolished slavery, and planters wanted a new source of cheap labor

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **D**. Britain abolished slavery across its empire by an 1833 act, so planters in places like British Guiana, Trinidad and Mauritius turned to contract workers from British India. Partition happened in 1947, more than a century later, so it cannot explain this wave.

Concept Tested: Indentured Labor **Bloom's Level:** Understand

Question 3

In 1972, Idi Amin gave South Asians in Uganda how long to leave the country?

- A. 90 days
- B. 30 days
- C. One year
- D. Five years

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **A**. On 4 August 1972, Amin announced that South Asians had 90 days to leave. About 80,000 people were affected, and around 28,000 went to the United Kingdom.

Concept Tested: Uganda Expulsion of 1972 **Bloom's Level:** Remember

Question 4

What did the US Supreme Court decide in *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind* (1923)?

- A. South Asians could become citizens if they had served in the army
- B. California's ban on Punjabi farmers was unconstitutional
- C. South Asians were not "white persons" under the law, so they could not naturalize
- D. Sikhs had the right to wear turbans in the military

? Show Answer



The correct answer is **C**. The Court ruled unanimously that "white" meant its everyday meaning, so Thind, a South Asian, could not become a naturalized citizen. Thind did later become a citizen in 1936 through a law for World War I veterans, but that was not what the 1923 decision said.

Concept Tested: Bhagat Singh Thind Case **Bloom's Level:** Remember

Question 5

Why did the Immigration Act of 1965 lead to a large increase in South Asian immigration to the United States?

- A. It ended the national origins quotas that had favored northern and western Europeans
- B. It gave every South Asian an automatic green card
- C. It created the Asiatic Barred Zone
- D. It only allowed immigrants who already spoke English

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **A**. The 1965 law replaced national origins quotas with preferences for family reunification and needed skills, which opened the door to South Asian doctors, engineers, students and then their families. The Asiatic Barred Zone came from the 1917 law and did the opposite.

Concept Tested: Immigration Act of 1965 **Bloom's Level:** Understand

Question 6

A worker from Kerala takes a construction job in the UAE. Under the *kafala* system, his visa and legal residence are tied to his employer, and he cannot become a citizen. Which concept from the chapter best describes him?

- A. Indentured Labor
- B. Gulf Migrant Workers
- C. Punjabi Pioneers in California
- D. Indo-Caribbean Communities

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **B**. Gulf migrant workers usually go on temporary contracts, often under *kafala*, without a path to citizenship. Indenture is a tempting choice because both involve contracts far from home, but the indenture system ended around 1920.

Concept Tested: Gulf Migrant Workers **Bloom's Level:** Apply

Question 7

According to Pew Research Center (2023 data), Bangladeshi American households had a median income of about \$78,400, while Indian American households had about \$151,200. What does this comparison most directly show?

- A. Bangladeshi Americans work fewer hours than Indian Americans
- B. All Asian Americans earn more than other Americans
- C. The 1965 law banned Bangladeshi immigrants
- D. Treating all South Asian Americans as wealthy hides real differences between groups

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **D**. The big gap between groups is one reason the model minority myth is called a myth: it hides real differences and struggles. The data say nothing about hours worked, so option A is an unsupported assumption.

Concept Tested: Model Minority Myth **Bloom's Level:** Understand

Question 8

In 2025, remittances to Nepal equaled about 32% of the country's GDP (World Bank). Which statement is the best conclusion from that number?

- A. Nepal receives more remittance money than India
- B. Most Nepalis live outside Nepal
- C. Money sent home by migrants is a very large part of Nepal's economy
- D. Nepal's government sends money to workers abroad

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **C**. A share of nearly a third of GDP means remittances matter a great deal to Nepali families and the economy. India receives far more money in total (about US\$150.7 billion in 2025), so option A confuses share with total amount.

Concept Tested: Remittances **Bloom's Level:** Analyze

Question 9

Simran's family friend says, "My uncle came to California from Punjab in 1910, worked on farms, and married a Mexican woman because almost no Punjabi women could come." Which part of the chapter does his story fit?

- A. Punjabi Pioneers in California
- B. Post-9/11 Backlash
- C. The Immigration Act of 1965
- D. British South Asians

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **A**. Punjabi men came to the US West Coast in the early 1900s, and many married Mexican and Mexican American women because South Asian women could rarely immigrate and California law banned marriages across racial labels. The 1965 law came more than fifty years later.

Concept Tested: Punjabi Pioneers in California **Bloom's Level:** Apply

Question 10

Balbir Singh Sodhi, a Sikh man, was killed on 15 September 2001 by an attacker who thought he was an Arab Muslim. What does this case best reveal about the post-9/11 backlash?

- A. Only Muslims were targeted after the attacks
- B. Hatred lumped together people of different faiths and backgrounds based on how they looked
- C. Hate crimes fell sharply after September 2001
- D. Sikh Americans were rarely affected because they are not Muslim

 Show Answer



The correct answer is **B**. Sodhi was targeted because of his turban and beard, even though he was not Muslim or Arab, which shows how attackers profiled people by appearance. Option A is wrong because Sikhs and other South Asians were also attacked, and FBI data show anti-Islamic incidents rose, not fell, from 28 in 2000 to 481 in 2001.

Concept Tested: Post-9/11 Backlash **Bloom's Level:** Analyze