

5.6 - “Victimized Twice”: 9/11, South Asian Americans & Islamophobia

The Asian American Education Project

Grade Level(s)	5-12
Lesson Overview	Breaking Through (1980s – 2010s). The terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 marked a turning point in American policies toward immigration, privacy, and the ways South Asian Americans were perceived and treated after. Students will learn about the various ways South Asian Americans have experienced disproportionate and targeted racial profiling, hate crimes, and other acts of discrimination. They will also learn about the ways in which South Asian Americans responded to the 9/11 attacks and the aftermath, providing insight into how immigrant communities are often caught between the pressures of representing themselves in a way that appeals to the expectations of the status quo, and the desire to practice their culture and traditions in a way that allows them to fully embrace their cultural and ancestral identity.
Lesson Objectives	Students will: ● Explain how the 9/11 attacks influenced behaviors, attitudes, and policies of the United States towards South Asian Americans. ● Explain how the behaviors, attitudes and policies toward South Asian Americans after the 9/11 attacks affected their communities. ● Explain how local and global events contribute to xenophobia, and Islamophobia as it pertains to South Asian Americans.

“Victimized Twice”: 9/11, South Asian Americans & Islamophobia Essay:

On September 11, 2001 (referred to as 9/11), the United States was attacked through the use of hijacked airplanes to strike designated targets, including the World Trade Center in New York City. These attacks were coordinated by Al-Qaeda, an Islamic terrorist group. While the group recruited from a number of countries and regions, the terrorists in this attack, including their leader Osama Bin Laden, were from Saudi Arabia (CNN Library, 2019). Shortly after, many South Asian, Arab, Muslim and Middle Eastern Americans reported racial profiling, hate crimes, and other discriminatory acts stemming from fears generated by the attacks because they were scapegoated for 9/11. (Iyer, 2015).

After 9/11, the citizenship and loyalty of South Asian Americans in the United States was questioned. According to comedian and activist Hari Kondabolu, South Asian Americans were “victimized twice” in the wake of the attacks. They too also feared terrorism like their fellow Americans, but the country they lived in and loved, hated them because of the attacks. Many Americans began to view South Asian Americans as “un-American” because of their skin color, ethnic garb, language, religion and other visible and invisible markers of cultural and ancestral identity. If you weren’t White, or more specifically, *looked* like one of the terrorists who attacked America, you were likely a terrorist, a terrorist sympathizer, or simply not American. These acts of prejudice and hostility against anyone who appeared to be Muslim due to their skin color, ethnic garb, language, religion and other visible and invisible markers of cultural and ancestral identity, came to be called Islamophobia.

Dark-skinned South Asian Americans who wore a turban; spoke in Urdu, Arabic, and other languages besides English in public; identified as Muslim; frequented mosques and gurdwaras; and owned or worked in gas stations and other small businesses were often the targets of retaliation for 9/11 (Iyer, 2015). On September 15, 2001, Balbir Singh Sodhi, a Sikh American, was killed in the first 9/11-related hate crime at a gas station he owned in Mesa, Arizona, by Frank Roque, a white airplane mechanic, who reportedly told friends he was going to “shoot some towel-heads.” According to a report by Asian Americans Advancing Justice, over 500 hate crimes were reported during this period.

The 9/11 attacks and subsequent irrational fear towards immigrants had severe implications for American security and immigration policies. In October 2001, Congress under the Bush administration passed the USA PATRIOT Act to stop and punish terrorist acts in the United States and around the world, and allowed for the legal surveillance of certain communities. The DREAM Act, which would have provided a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants who arrived in the country as children, failed to pass. The government instead concentrated its efforts towards deportations. And as recently as 2017, the Trump administration attempted a "Muslim ban" to deny the entry of individuals from a variety of predominantly Muslim countries to the United States (Kight, 2020).

To highlight their patriotism, some South Asians would hang the American flag outside their homes or businesses, stop wearing turbans or hijabs, stop speaking their native language in public, or visited houses of worship less (Iyer, 2015; Joshi, 2006). Some non-Muslim South Asians also distanced themselves from Muslims, dividing the South Asian American community. In essence, some South Asian Americans felt they had to make extreme efforts to assimilate into white American culture by willingly risking the loss of their cultural, ancestral, hybrid identity, or at the very least, risk losing the ability to openly share their cultural and religious identity with the nation.

Since 2001, South Asian Americans have actively resisted and countered the harmful stereotypes and assumptions of their "un-Americanness." Dozens of grassroots organizations aimed at supporting South Asians and educating the American public have grown across the country, such as The Sikh Coalition and South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT). Additionally, South Asian representation has significantly increased in various government offices. Examples include Nikki Haley an Indian American former governor of South Carolina and currently U.S. ambassador to the United Nations; Kamala Harris an Afro-Indian American formerly California State Attorney General and U.S. Senator from California, now Vice-President of United States; and Ravinder Bhalla, a Sikh American currently mayor of Hoboken, New Jersey.

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Vocabulary:

- **Gurdwara:** a Sikh shrine or place of worship¹
- **Hate Crime:** when a crime is committed or conspired to be committed on the basis of a person's specific characteristics. In most states, characteristics include race, color, religion, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, or disability. At the federal level all these characteristics are included as well as national origin.²
- **Islamophobia:** Islamophobia is a fear, hatred, or prejudice toward Islam and Muslims that results in a pattern of discrimination, oppression and violence. Islamophobia must also be understood as a system of both religious and racial animosity that is perpetuated by private citizens as well as cultural and

- political structures.³
- **Mosque:** a building used for public worship by Muslims⁴
- **Racial profiling:** the use of race or ethnicity as grounds for suspecting someone of having committed an offense⁵

¹ Definition is adopted from Merriam Webster Dictionary

² Definition is adapted from <https://www.justice.gov/hatecrimes/learn-about-hate-crimes>

³ Definition is adapted from <http://www.islamophobia.org/research/islamophobia-101.html>

⁴ Definition is adopted from Merriam Webster Dictionary

⁵ Definition is adapted from <https://www.aclu.org/other/racial-profiling-definition>

Discussion Questions:

- How did the 9/11 attacks change the way South Asian Americans were perceived and treated? How have other Asian Americans or other racial or ethnic groups been treated similarly?
- What risks did the perceptions pose for South Asian Americans?
- What were ways in which some South Asian Americans countered these perceptions?
- How did the 9/11 attacks influence America's policies on immigration?
- What is Islamophobia? How do local and global events influence Islamophobia?
- How might it have felt for South Asian Americans to be "victimized twice" and have phrases like "go home" or "go back to your country" yelled at them? Is it fair to say such phrases to people, even during times of distress/emergency like the attacks on 9/11? Why or why not?

Activity 1:

What does it mean to be "victimized twice?"

1. Begin this activity with a class discussion analyzing the quotes and stories by the two South Asian Americans featured in the video, Hari Kondabolu and Ansar Mahmood. Before showing the video, ask students to pay attention to what Hari Kondabolu and Ansar Mahmood say.

Share Hari Kondabolu's quote: *"One of the weird parts about being a Brown person in that post 9-11 era is you get victimized twice. Like on one hand you're afraid of terrorism as much as anybody else is at that point, like that's all you're hearing from the media. And then your country hates you. They don't, they don't say it openly, but when people are yelling things to you, telling you to go back to countries you're not even from because you're from America."*

After viewing the video have a group discussion:

- a. What does Hari Kondabolu mean when he says that South Asian Americans were "victimized twice?"
- b. What do phrases like "go home" or "go back to your country" imply about the person/people it is directed at? (Keep in mind we are all Americans.)
- c. What does it imply about the person/people who say such phrases?
- d. How do you think the person these phrases are being directed at feels?
- e. Is it fair to say such phrases to people, even during times of distress/emergency like the attacks on 9/11? Why or why not?
- f. In the video, Ansar Mahmood speaks positively about America and Americans despite being a victim of racial profiling.
 - i. What is racial profiling?
 - ii. Do you think what happened to Ansar Mahmood is a case of racial profiling?
 - iii. Do you think what happened to Ansar Mahmood is fair? Why or why not?
 - iv. What is his local community's reaction in Hudson, New York?
 - v. What might be some reasons for Ansar Mahmood's hope and optimism toward America

and the American justice system?

2. Ask students to do research on a prominent racial profiling case (e.g., Ansar Mahmood) or hate crime case targeting South Asian Americans after the 9/11 attacks.

Create a timeline that highlights important moments leading up to the case/incident and what happened after.

- Include relevant details that provide context for how the individual or the community was treated (e.g., important social/political events happening at the time, new laws that were passed or policies that were enacted).
- Include South Asian individuals or groups who emerged as positive changemakers, activists, or leaders in the fight for justice during the particular case/incident.
- Include at least five citations, including the documentary.

For an overview of the effect of 9/11 on South Asian Americans and examples of infographics, consider reviewing these two infographics from South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT):
https://saalt.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/18-Years-Since-9_11-P1.png
https://saalt.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/18-Years-Since-9_11-P2.png

Optional Activity:

Hari Kondabolu is a comedian who initially pursued law. He later became a comedian that addresses socio-political issues. Comedy can be an effective way to bridge audiences while sharing a specific point of view. Research Kondabolu's sketches and routines, and pick a piece in which you feel he captures a part of the South Asian American experience, particularly as an immigrant.

You can find clips of his routines on Netflix, YouTube, or his website,
<http://www.harikondabolu.com/videos/>

Analyze a sketch/routine and the message behind it. Write an "op-ed" piece on the clip that explains the message he is trying to share, the analogy or joke he uses, and how it is or is not effective in getting his point across.

Activity 2:

Proving your Americanness

In the video, Norman Mineta, former U.S. Secretary of Transportation under President George W. Bush recounts the story of how after 9/11 there was fear among the American public against South Asian Americans, and that the president wanted to make sure that what happened to the Japanese Americans during World War II, didn't happen again to South Asians. Soon after the 9/11 attacks, Congress passed the USA Patriot Act to stop and punish terrorist acts in the United States and around the world. In addition to enhanced law enforcement, the Patriot Act allowed for the legal surveillance of certain communities. The Patriot Act and other U.S. policies led to discrimination against South Asian and Muslim Americans.

1. Instruct students to do research on what happened to Japanese Americans during World War II, including being moved to incarceration camps and enrolling in the American military. Have them answer the following:
 - What happened at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii on December 7, 1941?
 - What was the U.S. government's reasons for placing over 120,000 Japanese Americans in incarceration camps when 80,000 of them were American-born U.S. citizens?
 - Do you think this was fair or unfair to American citizens to be treated this way? Why or why not?
 - How did Japanese Americans show their loyalty to the United States during the war?
 - How did South Asian Americans show their loyalty to the United States after 9/11?

2. Next, ask students to look up the USA Patriot Act:
 - Have students write down some of the provisions in the Patriot Act for fighting terrorism, and analyze how it might be wrongly used to target certain groups of people, in particular the South Asian community.
3. Next, ask students to look up the DREAM Act:
 - Have students write down the purpose of the DREAM Act, and the requirements for citizenship, and how immigrant groups would benefit from it being passed.
4. As an entire class discuss:
 - How are the attacks on 9/11 similar to the one at Pearl Harbor? How are they different?
 - Why did President Bush in 2001 not want the same thing that happened to Japanese Americans during World War II, being placed in internment camps, to happen to South Asian Americans?
 - Instead of being placed in incarceration camps, what happened to many South Asian Americans and immigrants after 9/11?
 - What does the Patriot Act allow the U.S. government to do in order to fight terrorism? Should the government have the ability to watch certain communities even if there is no evidence of any wrongdoing? Why or why not?
 - The DREAM Act was scheduled to be introduced before the 9/11 attacks. Why do you think it did not get passed?

Activity 3:

Racial Profiling

1. Have students share their own experience of profiling or research profiling in their own community or other communities. Examples include racial, sexual orientation, political, or hate crimes.
Discuss:
 - What happened?
 - What led to the case?
 - What were social or political events at that time?
 - If the incident did not happen to you, have similar incidents happened to you? How did you feel? Do you think it was fair?
 - Did it effect any changes?
 - Are there any positive change makers?
 - What can be done about it?

Extension Activities

To extend this lesson, consider the following prompts for research projects:

1. Research Executive Order 13769, also known as the “Travel Ban” or “Muslim Ban.”
 - How did sentiments from 9/11/01 play into the fears and sentiments that pushed this ban forward in 2017?
 - How did the various impacted groups, organizations, and communities react and respond to the policy?

Create an informational flyer (i.e., one that might be posted on a bulletin board at your school, church, or community center) that summarizes your key findings, such as what the ban is, its relation to sentiments that were intensified through and after 9/11, its effects on various communities, and any other relevant information you think people should know. Make strategic use of formatting and stylistic elements (headings, tables or columns, boldface letters, etc.) to keep the flyer engaging and easy to read.

2. Latinx communities, Asian American communities, and Black communities have all experienced and resisted against anti-immigration rhetoric and policies in various ways, a key way being through protests and art. Find and analyze at least 4 pieces of art or protest signs, and create a collage that depicts an image of the United States as a nation of and built by immigrants, using the themes, imagery, symbols depicted in the art/signs you found as you see fit.

Further Information

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