

1.6.1.1 - South Asian Pioneers in California

The Asian American Education Project

Grade Levels	4
Lesson Overview	According to California History/Social Studies Standards, students in the fourth grade study the “story of their home state” including “its many waves of immigration.” Most of the 4th grade California history standards address Spanish exploration and colonization. When Asian Pacific Islander Desi American (APIDA) history is taught in California immigration curriculum, it tends to focus on Chinese American immigrants via Angel Island and on Chinese exclusion laws. Not much is mentioned about early South Asian immigration. In fact, early South Asian immigrants played a significant role in California history and in the economic and agricultural development of California. This lesson focuses on the experiences of South Asian pioneers in California and their impacts on California’s culture and economy.
Lesson Objectives	Students will be able to: • Describe the experiences of South Asian immigrants in California • Identify the discrimination faced by early South Asian immigrants in California • Describe how South Asian immigrants overcame discrimination • Identify how South Asian immigrants contributed to California’s cultural and economic development

Lesson Implementation:

This lesson can be completed in one instructional session or over a period of 1-2 weeks. Here are options for lesson implementation:

- One instructional session: Complete Activity 1 and Activity 2 plus Discussion Questions
- Two instructional sessions: Complete Activity 1, Activity 2 plus Discussion Questions, and one option from Activity 4
- One week: Complete Activity 1, Activity 2 plus Discussion Questions, one option from Activity 3, one option from Activity 4, one extension activity
- Two weeks: Complete all activities plus several additional options

South Asian Pioneers in California Essay:

From 1899 to 1913, almost 7,000 **immigrants** from **South Asia** came to the United States. These early South Asian immigrants came from **Punjab**. Punjab is the northern region of South Asia. Most of these Punjabi immigrants were **Sikh**. They belonged to **peasant** families. They had little education. They spoke little English. So, they had limited work opportunities. Many worked in the lumber mills in British Columbia and Washington. Others helped build railroads and worked on farms in California’s Central Valley.

South Asian immigrants excelled as laborers and farmers. Soon after they arrived, they were seen as an **economic** threat. They were accused of taking away jobs from white men. As such, they faced hate and violence. For example, in Washington, the Bellingham riots of 1907 took place. A mob of 400-500 white men attacked the South Asians living in Bellingham. They drove South Asian immigrants out of town.

South Asian immigrants faced much discrimination. But they found ways to overcome it. They built community for safety and for power. Pushed out of Washington state, many South Asian immigrants worked on farms in California's Central Valley. In 1915, South Asian leaders built a Sikh **Gurdwara**, or temple, in Stockton, California.

The Stockton Gurdwara was the first Sikh temple in the United States. It was hugely important to the South Asian immigrant community in California. It was more than a church. It was a meeting place. It was a dining hall. It was a political center. It provided support and services. It also nurtured South Asian political leaders that made an impact on American politics. For example, Dalip Singh Saund was the Secretary of the Stockton Gurdwara. He then was elected as the first Sikh and Asian American U.S. Congressman in 1957.

In 1947, South Asian American immigrant leaders in California's Imperial Valley built the second gurdwara in the United States. (Today, there are over 50 gurdwaras in California.) South Asian immigrants were recruited to develop the Imperial Valley. They were expert farmers in India. They applied their knowledge to California. For example, they used water from the Colorado River to **irrigate** California's desert lands. They improved other farming techniques. They helped make California **fertile**.

South Asian immigrant farmers were doing well. But, racist laws banned them from owning land. So, South Asian immigrants had to find ways to transfer their property to others. Some made deals with white farmers, bankers, and lawyers who held land in their names. Some fought for their rights in courts.

Racist laws also banned South Asian immigrants from marrying white women. At the same time, racist laws banned South Asians from immigrating. Unable to bring wives from India, some South Asian immigrants married Mexican women and had children. There were many benefits to such marriages. First, their children could legally own land. Second, they created a distinct Punjabi-Mexican culture. For example, these families tended to speak Spanish. But, they ate South Asian foods. Today, **descendants** of these Punjabi-Mexican marriages are still thriving. South Asian immigrants built a strong community in the Imperial Valley.

To get around the immigration ban, South Asian leaders from Stockton helped South Asians enter the United States through Mexico. They created special maps. These maps showed safe travel routes. They also showed networks and resources.

South Asian immigrants have contributed greatly to California's culture, politics, and economy, especially farming. Today, people with Punjabi origins own farms on 10% of California's croplands. Punjabi American-owned farms produce over half of the country's raisins and almonds.

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Vocabulary:¹

- **Descendant:** one coming from an ancestral source; future generations
- **Economic:** relating to the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services
- **Fertile:** capable of sustaining abundant plant growth
- **Gurdwara:** a Sikh place of worship
- **Immigrant:** a person who comes to a country to take up permanent residence
- **Irrigate:** to supply land or crops with water by artificial means in order to promote plant growth
- **Islamophobia:** fear of and discrimination against people who practice Islam
- **Peasant:** a member of a social class responsible for tilling the soil as small landowners or as laborers
- **Punjab:** the region of the northwestern Indian subcontinent in Pakistan and northwestern India
- **Sikh:** a follower of Sikhism, which is a religious faith that originated in the Punjab region and is known for its rejection of idolatry and caste
- **South Asia:** a large geographic region including the countries of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, etc.

¹ Definitions adapted from Merriam-Webster Dictionary

Discussion Questions:

1. What were the early South Asian immigrants like?
2. What jobs did early South Asian immigrants have?
3. What role did racism play in the experiences of early South Asian immigrants in California?
4. What role did activism play in the growth and development of the South Asian immigrant community in California?
5. How did early South Asian immigrants build community?
6. What role did community play in the advancement of the South Asian immigrants in California?
7. How did South Asian immigrants transform California?
8. What is special about Punjabi-Mexican culture?
9. What is significant about the Stockton Gurdwara?

Activity 1: Introducing South Asian American Farmers (Suggested Time: 15 minutes)

Students will be introduced to South Asia and South Asian Americans, including farmers in California.

1. Ask students to share what they know about South Asia.
 - a. Show students a map of [South Asia](#). Tell students that South Asia consists of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and other countries.
 - b. Show students a map of the [Punjab](#) area. Tell students that most of the early South Asian immigrants came from this area.
 - c. Show students a map of [Punjab to California](#) to convey how far South Asian immigrants had to travel.
 - d. Tell students that some South Asian Americans, especially younger generations, refer to themselves as “Desi American.”
2. Have students quickly sketch what they think a farmer in California around 1900 looks like.
 - a. Have students hold their sketches up and tell students to look at their peers’ drawings.
 - b. Have students make observations about the sketches. Ask them: How did most of you characterize a California farmer in 1900? What informs this perception? What did you think about when you were drawing?
 - c. Tell students that South Asian immigrants are an important part of California farming history.
 - d. Show the [George Shima documentary](#) clip from 1:06 to 1:44. Explain that George Shima was one of the richest Japanese American farmers at that time. This film, which was made in 1914 at the Shima farm in Stockton-Sacramento, contains unique footage of South Asian immigrant farmworkers.
 - e. Show the [picture of a South Asian farmer](#). Tell students it is of a modern Punjabi American farmer in Tracy, California.
 - f. Ask students: What did you notice in these images? What is the purpose of studying these images? How do these images of California farmers in the 1900 compare to your sketches/preconceptions?
 - g. Tell students they will learn about the immigration of South Asians and their contributions to California.

Activity 2: Analyzing Power in Communities (Suggested Time: 40 minutes)

Students will learn about challenges early South Asian immigrants in California faced and how they overcame them through community power and support.

1. Have students do a close reading of the essay. (Option: Create a slide deck with the essay content.) Facilitate a discussion (see Discussion Questions).
2. Have students complete the following T-chart:

What challenges did the early South Asian immigrants face in California?	How did early South Asian immigrants overcome these challenges?

3. Discuss the significance of the Stocktown Gurdwara:
 - a. Show students a [picture](#) of the Stockton Gurdwara.

- b. Read aloud paragraphs 7-11 of [Roshan Sharma](#)'s first-person narrative of his experience at the Stockton Gurdwara.
 - c. Facilitate a discussion given the following prompt: What did you learn about the South Asian immigrant community from Sharma's account?
4. Show and discuss this [video about Punjabi-Mexican families](#):
 - a. Have students identify the causes and effects of Punjabi men marrying Mexican women.
 - b. Facilitate a discussion given the following prompts:
 - i. What were the impacts of restrictive immigration laws regarding Punjabi and Mexican immigrants?
 - ii. How did immigrants from Punjab and Mexico find each other?
 - iii. How did they come to be in California?
 - iv. What are the impacts and/or implications of these Punjabi-Mexican communities in California?
5. Have students complete a quickwrite given this prompt: In what ways was community important to early South Asian immigrants in California? Discuss student responses.

Activity 3: South Asian American Impact (Suggested Time per Option: 30 minutes)

This activity offers two options for teachers to use to have students further build their knowledge on the lasting and ongoing impact of South Asian Americans.

Teachers can choose one or more of the following options:

1. Have students research the impact South Asian Americans have made and are making in California.
 - a. Assign each group to research one of these topics:
 - i. Group 1: The Ghadar Party
 - ii. Group 2: Sikh Foundation & Dr. Narinda Singh Kapany
 - iii. Group 3: Dalip Singh Saund
 - iv. Group 4: Bhagat Singh Thind
 - v. Group 5: Didar Singh Bains
 - vi. Group 6: Charanjit Batth
 - b. Have each group answer the following research questions:
 - i. Who is your person/group?
 - ii. What did they do and when?
 - iii. How is their work significant to the South Asian community?
 - iv. How is their work significant to California and/or to the nation?
 - c. Have each group present their information in a poster.
 - d. Facilitate a gallery walk or give each group time to share their findings with the entire class.
2. Have students compare and contrast South Asian American communities.
 - a. Have students conduct further research on the South Asian communities in Stockton and Imperial Valley. Have students compare and contrast these two communities.
 - b. Have students research one of these South Asian ethnic enclaves and compare it to the Stockton and Imperial Valley communities:
 - i. Little Bangladesh in Los Angeles (Koreatown)
 - ii. Little India in Artesia, California
 - iii. India Square in New Jersey

- c. Have students answer the following research questions:
 - i. When and how did the community start?
 - ii. Who are the main founders/leaders?
 - iii. What are the main achievements or landmarks?
- d. Have students complete the [Venn Diagram with Three Circles](#).
- e. Facilitate a gallery walk or give each group time to share their findings with the entire class.

Activity 4: South Asian American Experiences (Suggested Time per Option: 30 minutes)

This activity offers two options for assessing students' comprehension of the significance of South Asian immigrants' experiences and contributions.

Teachers can choose one or more of the following options:

1. Have students write an explanatory essay describing the experiences of South Asian immigrants in California and their contributions to California history, culture, and economy.
2. Have students write a fictional story based on true events of South Asian immigrants in California. Examples include a day in the life of a South Asian farmer, the origin story of a Punjabi-Mexican descendant, or a recount of a South Asian immigrant's first trip to the Stockton Gurdwara. Have students highlight the factual details.

Extension Activities (Suggested Time per Option: 20-40 minutes)

1. Have students learn more about the connection between the Stockton Gurdwara and the Ghadar Party, a group of South Asians who published a Punjabi newspaper and focused on organizing India's independence from the British. Have students create their own class newspaper to advocate for a cause important to them.
2. Tell students that most Sikhs wear turbans. Have students learn more about Sikh practices and beliefs, specifically regarding the Sikh turban. Discuss the significance of turbans to the Sikh community by asking the following questions: Why do Sikhs wear turbans? How has wearing a turban made Sikh Americans targets for discrimination, before and after 9/11? How has wearing a turban helped Sikh Americans overcome racism and discrimination?
3. Have students learn more about the "turban effect" and how this affects Sikh Americans. Have students create a timeline that highlights different events that made Sikh Americans victims of the "turban effect" and targets for racism and discrimination.
4. Have students research the [Bellingham Arch of Healing](#) which is a granite monument dedicated to three Asian immigrant groups who were exiled from the town: the Chinese in 1885, the South Asians in 1907, and the Japanese in 1842. Have students research the history and purpose. Have students discuss the importance of such monuments.
5. Show the documentary, "[Roots in the Sand](#)," which presents a multi-generational portrait of the Punjabi immigrants in the Imperial Valley. Encourage students to take notes while viewing the documentary. Facilitate a discussion. (If you can't get access to the documentary, have students study this webpage instead: [Punjabi-Mexican families](#).)

6. Read aloud or have students read [*Step Up to the Plate, Maria Singh*](#) by Uma Krishnaswami. This book is about a Punjabi Mexican American girl's struggles on a farm in Yuba City, California. Have students identify the historical facts that form the basis for the book.
7. Have students use the search feature on the Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation's [Immigrant Voices](#) site in order to read profiles of South Asian immigrants who immigrated through the Angel Island Immigration Station. Have them create a comic strip illustrating the immigrant's experience. (If students read multiple profiles, have them compare and contrast their immigration experiences.) Some notable profiles include:
 - a. [Harnam Singh Dhillon](#)
 - b. [Vasaka Singh, Majah Singh, Fauja Singh, and Ram Chand](#)
 - c. [Sita Guha-Thakurta](#)
 - d. [Kartar Singh](#)
 - e. [Kanta Chandra](#)
 - f. [Vaishno Das Bagai](#)
 - g. [Dalip Singh Samra](#)
 - h. [Hazara Singh](#)
 - i. [Kehar Singh](#)
8. Have students interview a South Asian immigrant in order to learn about their immigration experience. Have them write a profile or biography about their person.
9. Have students research Dr. Bhagat Singh Thind, a U.S. veteran who fought through the court system to gain citizenship in the 1923 case, *United States vs. Bhagat Singh Thind*. Have students analyze the impacts of the case.
10. Have students learn more about Islamophobia after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Have students discuss the causes and effects of these attacks. Ask students the following questions: How has discrimination against South Asian Americans changed since they immigrated in the late 1800s? How has it stayed the same? How has the media misrepresented Muslims as terrorists which led to South Asian Americans being targeted based on their physical appearance?
11. Have students study how several South Asian American activist groups, such as South Asian Americans Leading Together and Sikh Coalition, worked to fight against Islamophobia. Have students create informative flyers to promote these groups.
12. Have students learn more about the Punjabi Farmers' Protest in India which started in 2020 and how California's Punjabi farmers protested in solidarity. Discuss the connection between the two communities by asking: Why do California Punjabi farmers care about what's happening in India?

Further Information:

The Asian American Education Project lesson entitled, "Early South Asian Immigration":

<https://archive.advancingjustice-la.org/what-we-do/curriculum-lesson-plans/asian-americans-k-12-education-curriculum/episode-1-lesson-6>

The Asian American Education Project lesson entitled, "Victimized Twice: 9/11/2001, South Asian Americans & Islamophobia":

<https://asianamericanedu.org/victimized-twice-9-11-2001-south-asian-islamophobia.html>

The Asian American Education Project lesson entitled, “Redefine American”:
<https://asianamericanedu.org/redefine-american.html>