



**TOPIC: Early South Asian Immigration**

**GRADES: 8 - 12**

### **BACKGROUND ESSAY**

In the 1880s, the United States began to intentionally and legally close their borders to non-Anglo immigrants through laws like the Chinese Exclusion Act, which barred Chinese laborers from immigrating to the United States. At that same time, there was a group of South Asian men who found a way to migrate and thrive in the United States, coming into ports on the East Coast. Some were laborers on British ships, who would then jump ship at U.S. ports. Others were Muslim peddlers from the Bengali region of South Asia who sold “exotic” products popular in the U.S. at that time. One of the earliest of those migrations consisted of Muslim men from the region of Hooghly, in the Indian state of Bengal, who were silk traders. And one of those men was named Moksad Ali.

Moksad Ali was one of the earliest to settle in New Orleans at a time when it was deeply segregated. The 1896 Supreme Court ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson* upheld racial segregation through a “separate but equal” doctrine, which ultimately shaped the experiences of South Asians like Moksad Ali. Although they were sometimes classified as “white” on government forms and often allowed to travel in white sections of public transportation, their national origin and darker skin ensured that South Asian men lived in segregated neighborhoods in both Jim Crow South and a de facto segregated North.

Not only did Bengali peddlers live in African American neighborhoods, they also married into the African American community, and through their wives and extended families most likely gained

access to local social and economic networks integral to a global network that spanned two empires, the U.S. and Great Britain. Their children also became well established in African American communities and other communities of color.

Several of these neighborhoods became the only communities in the United States who took in South Asian Muslim seamen and peddlers; therefore, granting them the opportunity to try to establish a new home base while their original homes were being colonized.

### **VOCABULARY**

- **Plessy v. Ferguson**: In 1896 the United States Supreme Court ruled that racial segregation laws were legal, as long as there were segregated facilities of equal quality available. This doctrine became known as “separate but equal.”
- **Jim Crow South**: Jim Crow laws were state and local laws that enforced racial segregation, banning interracial marriage and created poll taxes. These laws came about in the early 20th century in the South.
- **Hierarchy**: a system of ranking people or things
- **Sikh**: someone who practices Sikhism, a religion founded in India

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

- What does the story of Moksad and Ella tell us about race in the United States?
- Why do you think the African American community was one of the few that would welcome South Asian immigrants?
- What do we know about multiracial coalitions in U.S. history?
- In the clip, Sharmila Sen discussed how the United States runs on a system of racial hierarchy. What does Sen mean by the phrase “racial hierarchy”? Is this phrase still relevant today?
- Sen repeats the phrase “We’re not black. We’re not black. We’re not black.” repeatedly to emphasize what point?

### **ACTIVITY**

Have students locate and research sources regarding segregation and interracial marriage from 1890 through the 1960s. Students may focus on those assimilating to communities in the South, such as New Orleans and other notable locations in Charleston, Savannah and Jacksonville; or expand to research those that settled in the North, such as Harlem and Detroit. Have students explore the topic of South Asian (Indian, Bengali) Muslim peddlers and seamen and interracial marriage through newspaper articles and images, memoirs, and interviews, utilizing a variety of sources. Ideally, they will find 2 - 4 primary resources to use for the next step.

Divide students into small groups and have them share sources, organizing them in chronological order by creating a two-column chart with the right side dedicated to the title of the

source and the year(s) they spanned and the left side dedicated toward an analysis of the sources. Have students discuss a variation of the questions below:

- Share how your source relates to the clip.
- What did they reveal about the lives of South Asians? What did they reveal about the lives of the African American community?
- What stereotypes did it bring to light?
- Did certain events and/or observations challenge the stereotypes and different perspectives? What do they further emphasize?
- Summarize the historical narrative.

#### **FURTHER INFORMATION**

- [South Asian American Digital Archive](#) (SAADA)
- [“Preserving the Legacy of Bengali Harlem.”](#) Teresa Mathew, *Citylab*



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Major Funding for ASIAN AMERICANS is provided by Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB); Public Broadcasting Service (PBS); Wallace H. Coulter Foundation; Ford Foundation/JustFilms; National Endowment for the Humanities; The Freeman Foundation; The Arthur Vining Davis Foundations; Carnegie Corporation of New York; Kay Family Foundation; Long Family Foundation; Spring Wang; and California Humanities.