CHAPTER 1

Introduction

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This volume brings together the voices of South Asians in the Anglo-American academy on the construction and representation of the "postcolonial."[1] Combining interviews, literary criticism, commentaries, and cultural studies, *Between the Lines: South Asians and Postcoloniality* suggests the diversity and complexity of what one might designate the "postcolonial" subject. Further, even within the narrower parameters of specifically South Asian postcolonial subjectivities and their representation in the language and framework of the academy, the quest for a stable South Asian identity is a daunting venture; hence, the varied articulations presented here offer an understanding of identity as the product of complex interactions and negotiations. Enunciated variously, identity emerges as a dynamic process without primordial fixity, ultimately making it impossible to view this collection as a representative profile of the groups invoked in its title. Rather, the categories "postcolonial" and "South Asian" become tools for reconfiguring our understanding of identity and culture in light of an intricate mesh of social, economic, and historical events in the past and present.

Our focus on South Asians is motivated by several considerations. First, ours is an attempt to record the growing South Asian presence in the United States and Canada and to explore the intercultural dynamics that result from it. The historical and cultural specificity of South Asian experiences is often obscured or omitted within the discourse of "Asian" studies in Anglo-America, requiring expression in a space explicitly devoted to them. This volume is thus also an effort to disaggregate the group "Asian" by focusing on a subgroup that is not often recognized or represented, because that term is commonly thought to connote a Sinitic constituency. In the introduction to her "South Asian American Studies Bibliography," Rosane Rocher observes that a 1976 collection on

the Asian American experience included a piece titled "The Forgotten Asian Americans: The East Indian Community in the United States." "Twenty years later," she continues, "it remains the case that the Indian American experience in the United States has received less attention than that of some other Asian Americans."[2] Jane Singh's foreword to *Our Feet Walk the Sky* (1993) underscores the same problem: "As one of the least studied groups in the United States, people of South Asian origin have been overlooked by historians and social scientists as well as by scholars of Ethnic and Women's Studies."[3] But just as there may be sound historical reasons for the unimportance of South Asians in Anglo-America thus far, relative to other Asian and minority groups, particular configurations in the present oblige us to turn our attention to the role they have begun to play in the sociopolitical life of Anglo-America.[4] Much postcolonial discourse, for instance, has been the province of critics, theorists, and writers from the part of the world described as South Asia. Their work, although prolific and represented in various postcolonial collections, has yet to be brought together in dialogue.

Readers will find in this collection a sampling of perspectives from South Asian writers and critics in the Anglo-American academy on broad questions of identity, representation, and postcoloniality. Previously unpublished, the pieces attempt to address these issues within a contemporary frame of several compelling realities that invite a reexamination of the past and the present. Of particular note are these: economic and cultural, some would argue political, globalization; increasingly contentious relations in the United States and Canada between majority and minority as well as within minority groups; escalating religious fundamentalism in South Asia with resonances and support abroad; growing awareness in the academy of the need to unpack and complicate such categories as "Third World woman" and "postcolonial," even as the academic and popular market's demand for a consumable Other shows no signs of abating; and the mounting need to address in more nuanced ways the abiding issue of class differentials and privilege. Discussions on the "postcolonial" and "South Asian" proceed to unfold prismatically into a varied set of concerns that nevertheless converge as often as they diverge. The complexity and density of issues and concerns remind us that even though these critics and writers speak sometimes as "South Asian" and sometimes as "postcolonial," these labels are discursive and contingent as well as descriptive.

What are the discursive or particular contingent features that prompt us to acknowledge and assert a South Asian presence? For that matter, one may well ask, just who does "South Asian" refer to?[5] The term is most often used to describe people who either come directly from or can trace an origin to the Indian subcontinent. The synonymity of "South Asia" with "India" is usually explained,

though perhaps not justified, by that nation's historical sway in the region; more important, perhaps, it is a reminder of the roots of the tradition of study about South Asia in colonial India. Although scholars often use it interchangeably with "India," editors of collections in South Asian Studies tend to mention by name all the countries represented (or at least seen as legitimate members of the group). Customarily, "South Asia" would include Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka. These are countries that share contiguous or close borders and claim some modicum of cultural overlap—in language, religion, cuisine, or certain attitudes and practices—and a shared history of colonization before their evolution into modern nationhood. Yet it is rare to find all or even most represented in the available literature. *Between the Lines* reflects the views of those who responded to our call for all these constituencies to participate. That these voices predominantly derive from India and Pakistan may be a factor of their greater visibility and larger numbers within the academy. Even in this limited group, one observes with little surprise, the contributors show tremendous diversity of background and perspective.

Largely an academic configuration maintained to cope with the accidents of history that fractured what appeared to be a unitary peninsular entity, "South Asian" is a term that has long been in circulation to describe studies of the region dating from colonial times. Interest in South Asia has therefore as much a traditional and colonial as a contemporary, diasporic, and postcolonial dimension. The first South Asian Studies program in the United States began in the early 1940s at the University of Pennsylvania, taking its place among earlier programs of Oriental and Indic Studies in the United Kingdom and elsewhere.[6] The branch of academic inquiry referred to as South Asian Studies carries the undeniable legacy of the political and economic maneuvers of colonialism, themselves buffered by Orientalist scholarship. Although the number of South Asian Studies programs in Anglo-America remains small, those in existence share in this legacy, which continues to pose persistent challenges for students and scholars attempting to transcend Orientalist visions of South Asia. In contemporary collections in South Asian Studies, the encyclopedic coverage of topics—ranging from discussion of ancient religious epics to their televisualization in the last decade, from Dravidian linguistics to language policies under colonialism to the changing curricula in English Studies with greater attention to "native" writers at the turn of this century—suggests the continuing coexistence of more traditional kinds of study with a recognition of the new face of South Asia in an age of advanced technology and continual quest for cultural self-determination in the face of new challenges to its identity.[7]

The mobilization of the term "South Asian" in Anglo-America in the context of diasporic Anglo-American identity is a quite different and significantly more

recent phenomenon than that of South Asian Studies programs, although both presuppose an interest in South Asia(ns). The latter may include some examination of the diasporic in the study of South Asia, and the former may share the study of topics found in South Asian Studies programs, but the "South Asian" that has begun to emerge on the academic and sociopolitical scene more recently is the result of the intersection of past histories with present conditions arising from the more pronounced South Asian presence in the West in general and Anglo-America in particular.

In a general climate of multiculturalist identity formation, it seems less apt to ask, why the emphasis on South Asian in Anglo-America now, than to wonder why—despite the success of similar identitarian maneuvers by African Americans and other Asian Americans—there has been so little emphasis on South Asians. Both questions oblige us to turn to history. Although, according to the last census, the number of Asian Indians in the United States has increased to 815,477 and that of all South Asians to 925,803, while the number of people of South Asian origin in Canada increased from 314,040 to 420,433 (486,433 if one includes the number of those responding to the South Asian multiethnic category) between 1986 and 1991, the growth of South Asian populations in Anglo-America is a discontinuous and sporadic phenomenon.[8] In numerical terms, South Asians did not register a significant demographic presence in Anglo-America till the 1960s, when the Canadian government removed racial and national immigration restrictions (immigration regulations of 1967) and President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Act of 3 October 1965 (amending the Immigration and Nationality Act), which eliminated race, religion, and nationality as criteria for immigration and phased out the quota system in the United States.[9] The scanty nature of the early Asian Indian presence in the United States is catalogued by Surinder M. Bhardwaj and Madhusudana Rao: "From 1820, when a solitary Indian was admitted to the United States, through the next half a century, fewer than ten Asian Indians arrived per year on average. . . . This trickle of Indians, all told, amounted to fewer than 700 over a period of 80 years from 1820 to 1900."[10] Before the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act of 1924 stemmed any further influx, no more than 6,400 Asian Indians had come to America, as opposed to about 430,000 Chinese, 380,000 Japanese, and 150,000 Filipinos.[11] By contrast, the post-1960s South Asian influx in both countries demonstrates a dramatic increase in volume. In 1966–72, for instance, "immigrants from India [to the United States] totaled 50,990, a number equivalent to more than seventy percent of all the East Indian immigration over the last one hundred and fifty years." In Canada "approximately 200,000 South Asians immigrated between 1971 and 1982, with their numbers growing to over 300,000 by the end of 1982. Since then the Canadian

government has reduced the flow of immigration, but the numbers of South Asian immigrants to Canada remain proportionately high."[12] In the early 1970s, Idi Amin's expulsion of Ugandan Indians brought "some 70,000 Indian refugees from business and professional classes . . . under a special clause" to the United States; moreover, "many overseas Indians also immigrated from other countries, particularly the Caribbean Islands and the British Commonwealth countries."[13]

In broad terms, South Asian immigration to both the United States and Canada is best understood as a distinctly two-phase phenomenon, one phase dating from the early years of this century and another heralded by the immigration reforms of the 1960s. Small numbers and staggered, discontinuous patterns of immigration until the 1960s are not the only factors that must be acknowledged in accounting for the slow advent of the South Asian constituency on the social and political scene, however, since the difference between the two phases is not merely quantitative but qualitative as well. For one thing, "after nearly six decades of Punjabi-dominated immigration a more balanced and varied mix of South Asian peoples took up residence throughout the country [United States]" in the second phase. Moreover, the early wave of South Asian immigrants would have belonged (barring a very small number of middle-class students, elites, and political refugees) to the laboring and farming class without the advantage of much education.[14] Conversely, the typical profile of the second wave of South Asian immigrants suggests that "they were highly educated, English-speaking, had come to the United States for economic reasons, and had immigrated together as a family."[15] Sheth comments that "the new Indian immigrants consist mainly of college-educated, urban, middle-class professional young men and women of religious, regional and linguistic diversity." Although the earlier influx was from rural areas, "post-1965 Indian immigrants have generally come from large cities in all parts of India," and "most of them are fluent in English."[16] Well-educated and cosmopolitan for the most part, this group of immigrants would begin to attain visibility by virtue of numbers as well as their greater preparation and ability to enter the cultural, social, and political mainstream. The changing composition and numbers of South Asians seem to have had a definite impact in recent years: "All but ignored between 1930 and 1965, the South Asians in the United States and Canada are now starting to write and research their own social and historical role in North America's cultural mosaic."[17]

Actively discriminated against and discouraged from developing connections with their adoptive countries by laws restricting citizenship, marriage, and landownership, early immigrants were understandably prone to assume a "sojourner" rather than a settler stance. By and large they would have remained

isolated and fragmented, practically invisible in the Anglo-American context.[18] Even during this phase, however, there is evidence that early immigrants did participate in forming ethnic organizations, sometimes to gain leverage in their fight for greater civil rights, but more often to support the cause of independence from the British in India.[19] With increasing immigration and a more liberal environment in the wake of the Second World War, South Asians began to register their presence more aggressively. In the first half of the 1960s many South Asians had children who "were beginning to attend school at all levels"; it was at this time that "cultural pluralism and ethnic identity were concepts that gained great attention as a result of civil rights movements and a growing consciousness of minority lifestyles."[20] The rise of Asian American activism during this period, with Chinese, Japanese, and Korean Americans at the forefront, obscures the burgeoning consciousness on the part of South Asian communities, one that would become more noticeable in years to come.[21] Although a more marked presence would await the coming of age of a more sizable South Asian population, during this period "second-generation South Asians began to move slowly into mainstream politics, educational institutions, and to participate in American social life. A notable example was Dalip Singh Saund, an internationally known India-born member of the U.S. Congress . . . 1959–1962 and the first Asian to be elected to this legislative body."[22]

In more recent years, significant concentrations of South Asians in Anglo-American urban centers has brought them increasing attention. New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Washington, San Francisco, Houston, Philadelphia, and Detroit, for instance, featured Asian Indian populations from 10,000 to 55,000, according to the 1980 U.S. census.

> In the urban areas the sheer numbers of South Asians have attracted the attention of local politicians, city government, and the press as South Asians have grown to become an identifiable and sizable ethnic group within a heterogeneous milieu. Since many are from mercantile or professional classes their involvement in U.S. and Canadian life is in marked contrast to the relative obscurity of their predecessors; they are a more visible segment of their communities. As engineers, professors, doctors, lawyers, and businessmen, they have entered North American professional organizations and, sometimes, social groups.[23]

Professional and often highly educated, they have also become increasingly visible in workplace areas "such as high technology firms, hospitals, universities, and hotels/motels in or around metropolitan areas or along state highways,"