

# **Making Data Count: South Asian Americans in the 2000 Census with Focus on Illinois**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The 2000 census numbers have generated great excitement in the South Asian American community, which has posted record growth all across the United States. This report examines the demographic and socio-economic data from the 2000 Census to construct a profile of the South Asian American population from the national level down to the census tract level. Part I begins with the national scene, and briefly surveys some key states and metropolitan areas where growth has been particularly spectacular for the South Asian American population. Part II provides a detailed examination of the socio-economic characteristics of South Asian Americans at the national level. Part III provides a microscopic look at Illinois, especially the Chicago metropolitan area, and identifies issues where action is vital for the betterment of South Asian Americans. In Part IV, thumbnail sketches of South Asian American communities in California, New Jersey, New York and Texas are complemented with detailed socio-economic tables. This information can be a starting point for further analysis using the model provided for Illinois.

### **Part 1: The National Scene**

- The Asian American population has tripled in size over the last two decades, from 3.4 million in 1980 to 10.2 million in 2000. Among the major Asian American sub-groups, Asian Indians recorded the highest growth rate of 106% between 1990 and 2000.
- Of the seven ethnic groups comprising South Asian America, the four largest ethnic groups are Asian Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis and Sri Lankans. The 2000 Census shows Asian Indians at 1,678,785, Pakistanis at 153,533, Bangladeshis at 41,280 and Sri Lankans at 20,145. The remaining three ethnic groups, namely the Nepalese, Bhutanese, and Maldivians together number less than 10,000.
- South Asian Americans are somewhat evenly distributed across the country with 33% in the Northeast, 27% in the South, 23% in the West and 17% in the Midwest. They are most populous in the industrialized states of California, New York, New Jersey, Texas, and Illinois. These states accounted for 60% of the total South Asian American population in 2000. Nearly half the Bangladeshi population and one-fifth of the Pakistani population are concentrated in New York, while California holds more than a quarter of the country's Sri Lankan population. Asian Indians are more evenly distributed throughout the country, with California holding the highest number (18%) of Asian Indians.
- South Asian Americans make up less than 1% (0.67%) of the total U.S. population, and a significant 19% of the Asian American population. They are the largest Asian American group in 22 states, constituting more than a third of the Asian American population in 5 states and more than 20% of the Asian American population in 28 states.
- Heavy concentrations of South Asian Americans are to be found in metropolitan areas with about three quarters of all Asian Indians living in major urban metropolises.

### **Part II: South Asian American Socio-Economic Profile**

- The South Asian American population is young with a median age of 31 years, and, like most new immigrant populations in the U.S., has more males (53%) than females (47%). The ratio of males to females and the percentage of youth under 18 are higher among Pakistanis and Bangladeshis than among Indians and Sri Lankans.
- The percentage of South Asian Americans in the 18-64 years category, where people are most likely to be employed, is 70%, much higher than the national figure of 62% and even higher than the Asian figure of 68%. The average family size at 3.76 is consistent with the general population.
- More than two thirds of the South Asian American population 15 years and over is married and the percentage of divorced people among them is around 2%, much lower than the national average of 10%.

- A greater percentage of South Asian Americans 25 years and over have advanced graduate or professional degrees (from 23% to 34%) compared to the general U.S. population (9%), but they also have a slightly higher percentage (around 3%) with less than fifth grade education than the general population (2%). There is a higher percentage of women than men with less than fifth grade education, especially among Pakistanis and Bangladeshis.
- Nearly 76% of South Asian Americans are foreign born, and of these, 39% are naturalized, compared to 40% of the general U.S. population. 55% of the foreign born population of South Asian Americans entered between 1990 and March 2000, 28% entered between 1980 and 1989 and 17% entered before 1980. South Asian Americans who came before 1980 naturalized at a higher rate (85%) than the foreign born in the general U.S. population (74%).
- An overwhelming majority of South Asian Americans (ranging from 75% Sri Lankans to 96% Bangladeshis) speak a language other than English at home. Nearly one quarter or 416, 530 speak English “less than very well”, and this includes 349,562 Asian Indians, 44,663 Pakistanis, 3,344 Sri Lankans and 18,961 Bangladeshis, which is half of the Bangladeshi American population.
- Employment rates among South Asian Americans 16 years and over range from 56% to 67% and are comparable to rates among the general U.S. population (60%.) However, employment rates are particularly low for Pakistani and Bangladeshi women. Only one-third of their female population is employed compared to one half or more of the Asian Indian and Sri Lankan populations.
- Between one third and two thirds of South Asian Americans are in the management, professional and related categories, with Asian Indians and Sri Lankans (60% and 57% respectively) having a significantly higher percentage than the Pakistani and Bangladeshi (44% and 33% respectively). Between 21% and 31% are in Sales and Office occupations, and the percentage is significantly higher among women (28% to 43%) than among men (18% to 27%). Less than one-tenth are in service (except for Bangladeshis for whom the figure is 16%). Pakistanis and Bangladeshis have higher percentages (14% and 17% respectively) than Asian Indians and Sri Lankans (9% and 5% respectively) in farming, construction and production categories.
- The South Asian American median household income at \$50,723 is higher than the national median household income of \$41,994, but the per capita income at \$21,765 is only marginally higher than the national per capita income of \$21,587. Within the South Asian American population, Asian Indians and Sri Lankans have higher incomes than the Pakistanis and Bangladeshis. As in the general population, median earnings for males are consistently higher than for females. Both male and female median earnings are particularly low for Bangladeshis at \$30, 901 for men and \$19,308 for women.
- Home ownership among South Asian Americans is much lower (from 27% to 41%) than for the general population (66%).
- Despite their average high income, South Asian Americans have high poverty levels, across many groups—families (from 7% to 17%), families with female householder, no husband present (from 9% to 31%), individuals (from 10% to 21%), the elderly (from 9% to 27%) and children (8% to 25%). Nearly one in four Bangladeshi (25%) and one in five Pakistani (20%) children live below the poverty line compared to less than one in six for the general population.

### **Part III: Focus on Illinois**

- In Illinois, the population of South Asian Americans stands at 141,043 comprising 124,723 Asian Indians, 15,103 Pakistanis, 668 Bangladeshis and 549 Sri Lankans. They make up 35% of the Asian American population and are the largest Asian American group in the state. Asian Indians had a growth rate of 94% between 1990 and 2000.
- South Asian Americans in Illinois have a dual geographic pattern of dispersal in the suburbs and concentration in the city. There are three and a half times as many South Asian Americans spread out in the suburbs of Chicago as there are in the city itself.
- Cook and DuPage counties have the largest population of Asian Indians and Pakistanis. Asian Indians make up 44% of the Asian American population in DuPage county and 28% of the Asian American population in Cook county.
- There are 25,004 Asian Indians and 5,920 Pakistanis in the city of Chicago in Cook county. The suburb with the highest population of Asian Indians and Pakistanis is Naperville in DuPage county. The other top suburbs for South Asian Americans are in Cook county, namely Schaumburg, Skokie, Hoffman Estates, and Mount Prospect.

- In the city, South Asian Americans are concentrated in the north neighborhoods of West Ridge and Rogers Park, including the commercial strip of Devon Avenue. It is comparatively more imbalanced with respect to gender with more males than females. It is also a younger population, less educated, with more recent immigrants. South Asians here also have poorer English language skills, more workers in low-wage occupations, lower incomes and higher poverty levels. As with South Asians elsewhere in the state and the nation and in some respects to a more marked degree, the women are less advantaged than the men and the socio-economic differences between Asian Indians and Pakistanis are not significant.
- There are many areas in which South Asian Americans in Illinois need to act in order to achieve greater political representation and improved health and human services. These include bridging socio-economic gaps within their own community, consolidating alliances with other Asian American and minority groups, and garnering more resources from city, state and federal funds.

#### **Part IV: Select State Profiles**

- In California, South Asian Americans are heavily concentrated in the Bay area and in counties south of Los Angeles. Many of them came after 1990 as H-1B visa workers to fill the shortage of labor in the high-tech industry. Older South Asian American communities in the valley counties trace their ancestry back to the 1900's agricultural migration of Punjabis. The dot-com bust and outsourcing of white-collar jobs have affected South Asian Americans as much as, if not more than, other Americans.
- In New York, South Asian Americans are to be found mostly in the city of New York and its surrounding counties. Large numbers of Pakistanis and Bangladeshis are more evenly balanced here with the Asian Indian population than in other states, but many of them are in the lower sectors of the economy, exacerbating the class divisions both within and among the different South Asian American groups.
- In New Jersey, heavy concentrations in industrialized areas have given South Asian Americans high visibility which, coupled with their economic successes, contributed to an alarming rise in hate crimes. In response, South Asian Americans have turned to increased political participation.
- In Texas, there are dispersed pockets of South Asian American concentration in the northern and eastern counties surrounding Dallas and Houston, where they form over 25% of the Asian American population. As a comparatively new growth community, they have yet to learn to partner among themselves and with other Asian Americans.

#### **General Conclusions**

- National demographics reveal that South Asian Americans should lobby vigorously for immigration laws that permit family reunification, otherwise the current imbalance between male and female populations will only become greater.
- The high percentages of youth, especially among Pakistanis and Bangladeshis, groups points to a need to provide programs for the young.
- The high percentage of South Asian Americans in the working age population should help reinforce the story of their contribution to the building of America.
- The lower percentage of elderly (these numbers should be watched carefully in the future as they may grow significantly in a short while), the low median age and average family size are all demographics favorable to the growth and well being of an immigrant population. The high percentages of married couples and lower divorce rates can also be considered beneficial to South Asian American immigrant society.
- The higher educational and income levels, especially for Asian Indians and Sri Lankans compared to Pakistanis and Bangladeshis, have the potential to cause greater divides within the South Asian American community, and also to attract the kind of stereotyping and scapegoating from mainstream society that contribute to hate crimes and victimization.
- The high percentages of foreign born, and their comparatively recent entry into America, coupled with the high percentages of those who lack proficiency in English highlight the need for citizenship drives, language classes and programs that aid South Asian immigrants with their adaptation to America.

- Disparities in employment and educational levels between men and women in the South Asian American community are a cause for concern. Also, the higher percentages of South Asian Americans in management and sales and office occupations should not blind us to the significant (and growing) percentages of South Asian Americans in the lower wage service and production occupations.
- Low levels of homeownership and high poverty levels, especially among Pakistanis and Bangladeshis, shows that the American dream is still a long way away from being realized for these groups.
- As the dominant Asian American group in Illinois, South Asian Americans have an opportunity to provide leadership to achieve goals pertinent to their own community as well as contribute significantly towards a common Asian American agenda.
- Concentrations in the northern and western suburbs of Illinois, combined with high commercial visibility on Devon Avenue in Chicago, enable South Asian Americans to preserve ethnic identity as well as merge with the larger population.
- Comparisons among South Asian groups in Illinois shows disparities in education, income and poverty levels, with females being particularly disadvantaged. Suburban South Asians are clearly better off economically than those who reside in the city. Comparisons to other groups reveal that South Asian Americans share many of the same socio-economic characteristics as Whites, Blacks, Hispanics and other Asian groups.
- In California, New Jersey, New York, and Texas, patterns of similarity (such as urban concentrations) and differences (in education, occupation, and income) provide opportunities for nation-wide coalitions on national issues and local networking and partnerships on a regional agenda.

## **Looking Ahead**

The analysis of census data in this report reveals that South Asian Americans have the opportunity to secure a brighter future for themselves by adopting a multi-faceted approach towards policy making that also includes vigorous action for reform. Towards this end, SAAPRI envisages the following strategic agenda for South Asian Americans to empower themselves:

### Take an active role in policy making

The numerical strength of South Asian Americans in the population has reached the critical mass necessary to have their voices heard in a democratic society. On the surface, some of the statistics tout the emergence of a highly prosperous community, but a closer examination reveals serious inequities and disparities that can only be addressed through policy reform. Socio-economic differences within the South Asian American population need to be addressed with as much urgency as the pursuit of common goals outside the community. We need to work for flexible and more humane immigration laws, stricter enforcement of hate crimes, and increased access to health and human services. This cannot be achieved without greater involvement in the decision-making process and the use of resources in a way that benefits the larger community.

### Act collectively to build a South Asian American identity

South Asians share many of the same concerns as other Americans, but they also have special needs which they can address through a unified approach as South Asians. While Asian Indians dwarf the other South Asian groups in terms of numbers, regional concentrations of Pakistanis, Bangladeshis and Sri Lankans significantly enhance the South Asian collective. Asian Indians have a responsibility to be sensitive to the special needs of the smaller groups; the smaller groups, in turn, need to recognize that their best hope for advancement is in working under the South Asian American umbrella. The variety of ethnic, religious and socio-economic groups makes it difficult to achieve unity. The South Asian American community itself needs to be aware of the dangers of fragmentation and isolation. In the wake of the 9/11 terror attacks, it has become even more important to educate the general public as well.

### Forge partnerships as Asian Americans and with other groups who share a common agenda

The significant proportion of South Asians in the Asian American population, both nationally and in several key states, enables them to have a more dominant voice in policy making. They need to work more

aggressively to ensure that they have a seat at the Asian American table and are not sidelined when it comes time to reap the fruits of co-operation. There are many other minority groups, including African-Americans and Hispanics, with whom they should make common cause for broader justice. Knowing that they share demographic and socio-economic characteristics with many of these groups should make it easier for them to build coalitions, at the grass roots level as well as in higher echelons of governance.

#### Create a framework that will dispel the “model minority” myth

This involves much awareness-raising, both within the community and outside. Regular reports showcasing high achievement and above-average income for South Asian Americans are prevalent in ethnic and general media. They no doubt have their beneficial aspects in making the community proud, but they should not blind us to the broader and deeper truth of social inequality revealed by census data. We should especially guard against the divisive effects of this myth, its potential to alienate us from other minority groups with whom we should be forging partnerships for greater equality.

#### Engage in greater civic participation

On the one hand, census figures show that South Asian Americans can set their political sights higher, and seek greater and more meaningful representation that is commensurate with their demographic strength. But on the flip side, they also reveal that, at 0.67% of the total U.S. population, they can hardly influence public policy on the sheer strength of numbers. They need to pay their dues to the political process through greater civic participation at the local level, in the school board and county commissions. Political prominence at the state legislature and congressional levels is, indeed, exciting but we also need to participate at more modest levels and weave ourselves more tightly into the fabric of our everyday lives as Americans. This can be done by transcending the ethnic agenda and appealing to our broader communities