

South Asian American Digital Archive. Philadelphia, Pa. <https://www.saada.org>.

Projects, events, and archives. Founded 2008. South Asian American Digital Archive staff: Samip Mallick, executive director; Maryam Ahmed, program coordinator.

“There is nothing inherently liberatory about community-based archives.” These words, uttered by South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA) cofounder and University of California, Los Angeles, professor of archival studies Michelle Caswell, might sound defeatist at first glance. Shared at a March 2020 talk titled “Urgent Archives: Communities, Representation, and the Fight against (Symbolic) Annihilation,” her statement was a reminder to center questions of justice and liberation in archival efforts. At the event, Caswell offered a powerful assessment of the historic use of institutional archives to repeatedly reauthorize the status quo, and she critiqued the facile use of the term *community archives* to describe privileged groups that extract materials from a community. Such critiques illuminate the desperate need to support community archives created and used by marginalized communities for liberatory memory work. After all, community archives born out of such impulses bring history to life, both for present justice work and also to imagine and build radical futures.

Since 2008, the South Asian American Digital Archive has worked to digitize artifacts of South Asian American history, contextualize them in culturally appropriate ways, and make them accessible to a broad audience. Although it now has two full-time employees and a couple of externally funded interns, SAADA has accomplished its work, including the preservation and sharing of its over four thousand archival items, mostly through volunteers. Eschewing institutional affiliation from its founding, executive director and cofounder Samip Mallick and Caswell sought to build an autonomous, sustainable, community-led, and community-accountable organization. In recent years SAADA has secured grant funding for specific arts and archival projects from the Pew Center for Arts and Heritage and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, but it considers community funding (from 790 donors in 2020) the basis for its work.

Part of a larger movement to forge a new identity and community—coalitional South Asian America—SAADA’s work incites important conversations about the nature and purpose of archives, on the one hand, and the changing face of the American national project, on the other. South Asian American is a coalitional identity label that encompasses people who live in the United States and Canada and trace their heritage to the South Asian subcontinent, consisting today of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Some consider Afghanistan and Myanmar part of South Asia as well. Applying racial justice frameworks from Black and Asian American intellectual and activist traditions, the proponents of coalitional South Asian America advocate for critical solidarities externally with other communities of color in the United States and Canada, and across many highly volatile internal fault lines. Underrepresented and misrepresented from the outside, and brimming with contentious internal divisions, coalitional South Asian America is a nascent and unstable movement that began gaining traction in the 2000s, especially among activists, artists, and intellectuals organizing online. Those who dislike the term within the communities it seeks to bring together see *South Asia* as a euphemistic way to suggest solidarity while obscuring massive internal diversity and inequality. Many discussions about South Asia and South Asian America are, indeed, dominated by the concerns of a subset who are privileged along a number of axes such

as nation of emigration, religion, caste, class, and color. This critique has been productively made against SAADA, including by its proponents and members. To instantiate an inclusive, social justice-oriented vision of South Asian America in a community archive is therefore an inherently herculean and political task, necessitating a creative and reflexive stance regarding what an archive is.

The digital archive is the heart of SAADA's work, around which they have built a variety of contextualizing resources, participatory digital projects, and live events. SAADA specializes in uncovering, connecting, and sharing artifacts from overlooked aspects of South Asian American history, stretching back to early 1900s anti-imperial activism on the West Coast. Making the enduring presence and internal complexity of South Asians in America visible and legible is a seemingly simple act, but it demands a massive coordination of volunteer labor. SAADA does this with profound effect. The archive is postcustodial and digital, meaning that no original documents or objects are physically kept by SAADA, and all items digitized are meant for public access. As a consequence, the archive leans toward the easily digitizable, with an emphasis on records such as photographs, flyers, newsletters, and official documents. Along with the practical benefit of the decision to be a postcustodial archive (as physical storage would increase overhead), this choice was also a political one. While seeking to legitimate and share South Asian American history, SAADA does not control who may see the items or claim ownership—of the artifacts or of a singular South Asian American narrative.

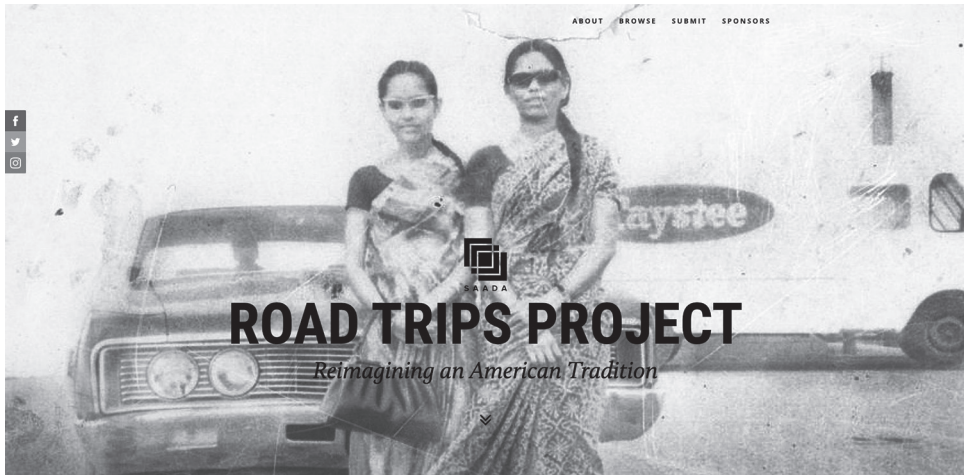
SAADA does not suggest, as a completed museum might, that there is an already established story to be gleaned from their work. The one-room Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History exhibit, "Beyond Bollywood: Indian Americans Shape the Nation" (February 2014 to August 2015), for example, was both hailed as an important moment for South Asian American visibility on the National Mall and critiqued for the limited view it offered of this exceedingly diverse demographic. Those frustrated felt it was dominated by stories of Indian American success and inclusion, and organized with mainstream white audiences in mind who might need to be convinced of the friendliness and ordinariness of middle- and upper-class, assimilated Indian Americans. The impossible limitations of the one-room exhibit were acutely felt by its curators, who preferred the ways the physical exhibit, its online version (<http://smithsonianapa.org/beyondbollywood/>), and the curatorial process became jumping-off points for robust reflection and conversation. SAADA, instead, started with an investment in connecting, complicating, and preserving South Asian American stories from a South Asian American perspective and for the benefit of its diverse internal communities. Its archive and its projects are intentionally open-ended, with its longest-standing participatory project started in 2013 still open for submissions. SAADA's archival collecting efforts focus on overlooked or underappreciated aspects of South Asian American history such as civic and civil rights engagement, LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) activism, early immigrants, and military service. SAADA is an organization, like the communities it documents and the identity it seeks to evolve, in the process of becoming. The proponents of SAADA embrace this open-endedness as an opportunity to actively shape their telling of the past in the hopes of building liberatory futures.

In the early 2010s, SAADA began experimenting with participatory projects, an experience that forced the organization to reevaluate its mission and goals. In 2011 SAADA started producing engaging articles that combine archival materials with personal narratives and political insight in its slick online magazine *TIDES* (<https://saada.org/tides>). In

2013 SAADA began inviting people who had immigrated to the United States to share stories about their first days in the country (<https://firstdays.saada.org/>). Submissions could be in the form of text, audio, or video, including links to content put up on sites such as YouTube. Originally conceived as a place for South Asian Americans to interview their relatives or share their own experiences, Americans with very different migration stories began submitting to the site. These projects aimed at bringing the archive to life, especially the First Days Project (FDP), posed existential questions for the organization. On the one hand, what good is an archive that is not inviting, accessible, and lively? On the other hand, some archival professionals questioned if records created at SAADA's encouragement (and therefore not "naturally occurring"), and housed on other sites' servers, counted as archival records. For example, while all submissions of arrival stories are posted on the FDP site, only some of the South Asian American submissions to FDP end up included in the official archive (<https://www.saada.org/browse>). Both *TIDES* and the FDP put organizational energy into sites of engagement outside the digital archive, narrowly defined.

At their first annual retreat in the fall of 2013, the SAADA Board of Directors struggled with what to do about the FDP, eventually deciding to include stories from beyond the South Asian American community. The site now comprises over five hundred stories featuring immigrants from over ninety countries. The complex situation and ensuing decision marked a shift in SAADA's understanding of its mission and goals. The point of building and preserving the archive was to mobilize it. Having met while working to organize the papers of poet and University of Chicago Professor A. K. Ramanujan, Mallick and Caswell decided to start SAADA in 2008 because of their firsthand experience witnessing the incomplete and disconnected traces of South Asian American history scattered across multiple institutions and repositories. Addressing critical gaps and building connections in the archive is only possible through concerted and active effort, and involves energizing their community and inviting in a broad audience. At the same time, this mobilization overlaps with knotty discourses of American-multiculturalism-as-exceptionalism. Attending to the ways South Asian Americans are racialized, formerly colonized subjects who also are settlers is a task that further complicates SAADA's mission, but it is work that many South Asian American activists, inside and outside SAADA, are importantly taking up.

In the years since, SAADA has rolled out an array of projects and resources that mobilize its archival materials in classrooms, concert halls, living rooms, and the streets. The Road Trips Project (<https://roadtrips.saada.org/>), Election Stories project (<https://www.saada.org/electionstories>), and Letters from 6' Away (<https://www.saada.org/letters>) invite South Asian Americans to appreciate and share their quintessential American rituals and experiences, ranging from road trips and voting to surviving a pandemic. Special events such as Beyond Apu: A Community Conversation (<https://www.saada.org/project/beyond-apu-philadelphia>), Basement Bhangra Unplugged (<https://www.saada.org/project/basement-bhangra-unplugged>), and the South Asian Journalists Association's Anniversary Conference (<https://www.saada.org/storytelling/saja-25>) bring together celebrities, professionals, and fans to discuss and memorialize crucial events in South Asian American history. A crowd-funded textbook with over sixty contributors, *Our Stories* will provide a multidimensional introduction to South Asian America for use in classrooms and libraries. Revolution Remix (<https://www.saada.org/revolutionremix>), SAADA's radical history guided walking tour of Philadelphia, recontextualizes the familiar



This image shows the home page of South Asian American Digital Archive's Road Trips Project. The project reimagines an American tradition through the lens of South Asians journeying across the United States. *Courtesy Road Trip Project, <https://roadtrips.saada.org/>.*

landmarks associated with the nation's Founding Fathers, populating the city's streets with visions of Dr. Anandibai Joshee who graduated from the Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania in 1886, weary Bengali indentured sailors petitioning Benjamin Franklin to help them return home, and the rousing rhetoric of Irish and Indian immigrants marching together in 1920 to protest British imperialism. Produced with support from the Pew Center for Arts and Heritage, the audio tour also includes five songs commissioned by South Asian and South Asian American musicians inspired by the histories mobilized in Revolution Remix.

For *Where We Belong: Artists in the Archive* (<https://www.saada.org/wherewebe> long), which was also supported by the Pew Center for Arts and Heritage, SAADA paired South Asian American artists with stories from the archive to create new artistic works, such as "Lavaan" (2017) by Zain Alam (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5a_aG12YacE). The title references the prayers of a Sikh wedding ceremony. From a few reels of silent home movies of Sharanjit Singh Dhillonn and Dorothy Dhillonn's interracial marriage and family in 1960s Oklahoma and California, Alam cut together and scored a nine-minute video. In the last third, as cymbals crash and an electric guitar crescendos, images of modern news footage highlighting the 2012 mass shooting at the Oak Creek, Wisconsin, gurdwara (Sikh temple) and gas station attacks are just intelligible over scenes of the children at play. The new works were shared at a public event and symposium in April 2017 where attendees explored "ways to challenge the historic and continued erasure of stories of marginalized communities in the United States through storytelling, discussion, and art-making." In August of that year, on the five-year anniversary of the mass shooting at the Oak Creek gurdwara, SAADA shared the materials from the April event for home gatherings, encouraging community members to come together in dialogue and reflection. *Where We Belong* thus combines creative works, archival materials, and community activism, eagerly connects people across domestic (for example, home movies, living rooms) and public (symposium, digital archive, national

mourning) spaces, and produces transformative resonances across time (news footage over archival film).

South Asians have been part of the American experiment—for example, as indentured laborers—since before the nation's founding, but South Asian America today is deeply shaped by a major influx of well-educated, high-caste, highly skilled workers who came after the passage of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act. While the demographics of the community are significantly more diverse today, the voices of the most privileged continue to dominate South Asian America, a problem reproduced in organizations such as SAADA. Concerned by these gaps in the archival record and invested in turning over curatorial control to community members, SAADA, with support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, inaugurated its Archival Creators Fellowship with its first cohort of three in 2019 (<https://www.saada.org/acfp2019>). Another six followed in 2020 (<https://www.saada.org/acfp2020>), with six more to be selected in 2021.

The inaugural fellows focused on gathering stories from Dalit communities in the United States, Guyanese immigrants, and queer and trans South Asian Americans. Rather than seek to fill deep existential gaps by pursuing archival records, SAADA partners with the Archival Creators Fellows to “create archival collections that reflect the histories and perspectives of some of the most marginalized groups within the South Asian American community.” While many of the resulting collected artifacts and oral histories are incorporated into the main archive, each 2019 fellow created their own miniarchive, replete with its own graphic design, narrative thread, and culturally specific curatorial ethics. These include *An Altar to Dalit Honor* (<https://www.saada.org/dalithonor>) and *The Things We Carried* (<https://www.saada.org/thethingswecarried>). In creating the *Archive of Queer Brown Feelings* (<https://www.saada.org/qbf>), for example, Mustafa Saifuddin had to balance SAADA's ethic of radical accessibility with the ways resisting documentation is a crucial tool queer and trans South Asian Americans use strategically to protect themselves. Embracing the incommensurabilities at the heart of South Asian America, SAADA supports archival creators in challenging received archival wisdom and welcomes the messy production of overlapping but never quite coterminous visions of community archiving.

Bookended by a profound lack of media representation and a massive rise in hate crimes following the attacks of September 11, 2001, on one end, and the election of Kamala Harris as the first female, Black, and South Asian American vice president, on the other, the last twenty years have marked a turbulent and generative coming-into-legibility for coalitional South Asian America. SAADA's path mirrors and critiques South Asian America's tumultuous growth and speaks to a national and generational racial reckoning underway more broadly. Crucially, SAADA is limber, frequently eschewing the trappings and assumed practices of traditional archives when they fail to help it meet its liberatory goals. “There is nothing inherently liberatory about community-based archives,” nor South Asian America, nor the American project. SAADA reminds us that, to the degree we center questions of justice, equity, and liberation in our mobilization of history, they could be.

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