In 1959, 18-year-old Tarig Abbas departed from Lahore and arrived in New York City, en route to Dallas where he had been placed through the American Field Service foreign exchange program. Texas, he soon realized, wasn’t exactly the America he imagined: “I only knew of New York [...] I had no idea, no concept of what to expect or what I was going.”

In 1973, Mamata Misra left Mumbai for Maryland with her husband of six weeks, and came to her own conclusions about the country she had just adopted: “I realized that for days and months I would be meeting only strangers talking strange and it was up to me to make friends out of strangers and create familiarity out of the unfamiliar.”

These two snapshots form a part of the “First Days Project,” a new initiative by the South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA) to collect and share stories from South Asians about their first day in the United States. An ambitious and interactive online exhibition, the First Days Project creates a platform for community members to upload their first day in the United States. SAADA continues its longstanding effort to showcase stories that reflect the diversity of the South Asian diaspora. According to the 2010 census, there are more than 3.4 million Americans of South Asian heritage, a growth in 81% between 2000 and 2010. In other words, 1 in every 100 Americans traces their heritage to South Asia, which includes India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan and Maldives.

Yet there is also a critical danger in narratives of South Asian Americans being lost, particularly the ones left out of history books and not featured in the media. Stories like Tarig Abbas and Mamata Misra’s underscore just how diverse and complex the lives of South Asians in the U.S. have been.

The First Days Project reveals the intimate details of arrival that are missing from South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA) is the only independent nonprofit organization in the nation working to document the rich histories of South Asians in the United States and ensuring that this community’s stories are preserved and protected for future generations.

All materials and stories that SAADA collects are made freely accessible to the public through its website at www.saadigitalarchive.org

SAADA’s First Days Project Website: www.saadigitalarchive.org/firstdays Contact: Sampal Mallick, Executive Director of South Asian American Digital Archive, 1219 Vine Street, Studio G Philadelphia, PA 19107-1111 Tel: 215-259-8055 Email: sampal@saadigitalarchive.org

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SAADA’s First Days Project

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