Sepia shades of immigrant history

RAGINI BHUYAN 1st Jul

Silicon Valley, California, today runs on the human capital of first, second and third generation Indian immigrants, but did you know that the Indian presence there dates back to as early as the 1900s? Or that the first South Asian American to be elected a member of US Congress was Dalip Singh Saund in 1956? And that one of his chief contributions was fighting for legislation that enabled South Asians to become American citizens?

Fascinating tidbits like these and more can be found at the South Asian American Digital Archive's (SAADA), a volunteer-run, non-profit organisation that was founded in 2008 by a group of Indian origin academics. It is through SAADA's 'Early Immigration' collection that you learn of the Bellingham riots of 1907, where hundreds of South Asian workers, primarily Sikhs, were attacked by a mob and jailed.

According to Samip Mallick, executive director of SAADA, "Prior to 1947, there was no nation-state of India or Pakistan. Accordingly, in the US, those from South Asia were referred to as Indian, East Indian or often 'Hindoo', regardless of their religion or place of origin. While national identities have changed over the last 65 years, South Asians here continue to share much in common, including how they are seen and understood in American society."

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This is one of the reasons why the founders of the archive chose to broaden the focus to look at the region as a whole, and not focus on one particular community or country. According to Mallick, SAADA is also the only independent digital archive that is systematically documenting this history. It functions with the help of an extensive network of volunteers, as well as funding from private and family foundations like the Asian Giving Circle in Chicago, Kiran Bavikatte Foundation (Deerfield, Illinois), and the Jhamandas Watumull Fund (Hawaii). SAADA also offers research and fellowship opportunities through...
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SAADA’s collection encompasses over 1,500 photos, letters, newspaper articles, organisational pamphlets and any other literature that casts light on the evolution of the South Asian community in the US. One of their most interesting collections, a delight for any history buff, is the writings, photos and pamphlets of Ghadar party members. The Ghadar party was a radical party founded in 1913 by mostly Punjabi immigrants in the Western coast of the US, to fight for and spread the cause of Indian independence from British rule.

Other collections include copies of the journal, Young India, material related to the Watumull family, one of the first South Asian American families to settle down in Hawaii, the Hindustan Association of America, etc. SAADA’s founders conceived of it as a freely accessible, digital archive to enable wider access to the historical material.

Summing up SAADA’s mission, Mallick says, “All materials we collect are freely accessible for everyone because we believe strongly that the history does not belong to any one individual, organisation or institution; rather that it is our community’s history and it belongs equally to everyone.” And in the light of the 9/11 backlash, such a project assumes greater urgency.

Mr. Samip Mallick is a pioneer and we in Cleveland could not be prouder of him and his work! This past April he visited us and impressed the audience. See link below:
http://blog.cleveland.com/asia...