



South Asian America: Considerations for Mental Health Practitioners

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Overview

- History
- Language and culture
- Intersections of identity
- Migration to the United States
- Mental health considerations



Scope

This webinar is intended to provide a broad overview of cultural considerations when working with the South Asian population.

While I will be talking about some historical background, I am not a historian but I will provide some resources you can refer back to. I will be focusing on the mental health needs of the South Asian community.

If you are working with a client from this culture, I would recommend seeking out cultural consultation on the client's specific and unique cultural background.



Clinical Orientation

Theoretical Orientations

I use an eclectic approach tailored to my individual clients. Theoretical orientations I lean on include Interpersonal Therapy, Attachment-Based Therapy, and Narrative Therapy. I also approach my work from an Existential standpoint.

Practical Approaches

Additionally, when appropriate, I use strengths-based approaches to identify clients' resources and resilience. I aim to help them integrate social support and unique cultural practices into their therapeutic journey.

History, Language, Culture, & Religion

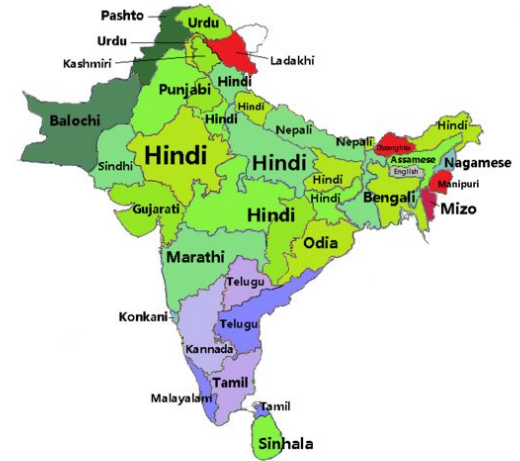
South Asia

- Southern subregion of Asia comprised of the modern-day states of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.
- Afghanistan: crossroads of South Asia and Central Asia.



Language

- South Asia is home to one of the earliest known civilizations and remains an incredibly diverse region – topographically, linguistically, and culturally.
- It comprises several hundred languages within these broad language families:
 - Dravidian
 - Indo-Iranic
 - Tibeto-Burman
 - Austroasiatic





Religion

- “South Asia is the birthplace of four of the world’s religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, and Jainism. Three that come from West Asia: Christianity, Islam, and Judaism arrived later. Zoroastrianism, the major religion in ancient Persia (now Iran) until it became Muslim, also survives in India.”
- Each region within South Asia adheres to unique cultural and religious practices.



Caste

- Nyima D. Lama: “Caste: a social, hierarchical structure existing in South Asia with each caste having its own social and cultural practices. A person’s caste (assigned at birth) affects their access to opportunities and resources. This system affects over 1 billion people around the world.”
- The caste system is still very much alive in South Asia and within the South Asian diaspora.
- An estimated 90% of Indian immigrants come from caste privileged backgrounds.
- Tinku Ray: “A 2018 survey of 1,200 individuals of South Asian descent in the United States found that 26 percent said they had experienced a physical assault because of their caste, while 59 percent reported caste-based derogatory jokes or remarks directed at them. More than half said they were afraid of being outed as Dalit. The survey is the only one of its kind ever done.”

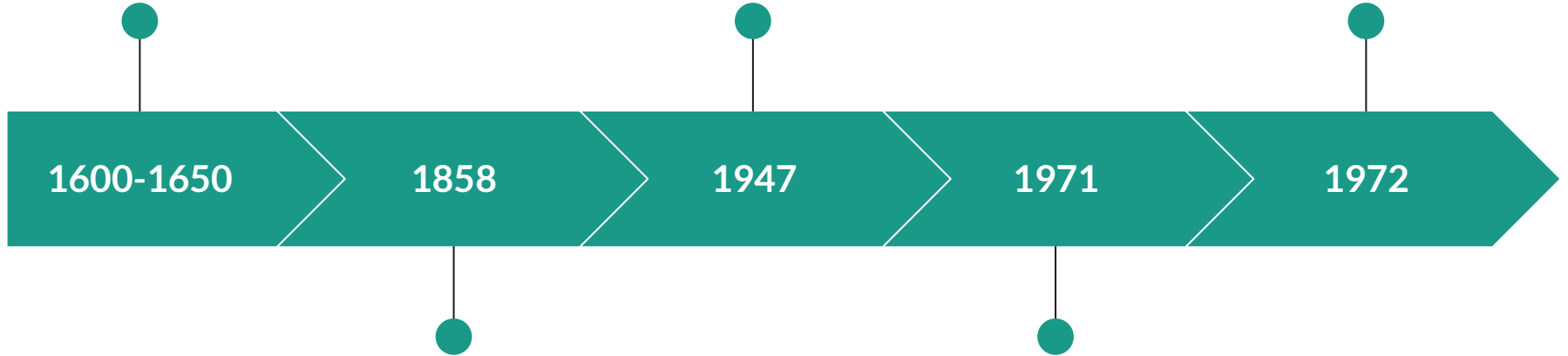
“...The outcaste is a by product of the caste system. There will be outcastes as long as there are castes. Nothing can emancipate the outcaste except the destruction of the caste system.”

B.R. Ambedkar, Annihilation of Caste

British, Dutch, and French trading companies established bases in South Asia.

Partition of India and Pakistan.

Ceylon becomes Sri Lanka.



1600-1650

1858

1947

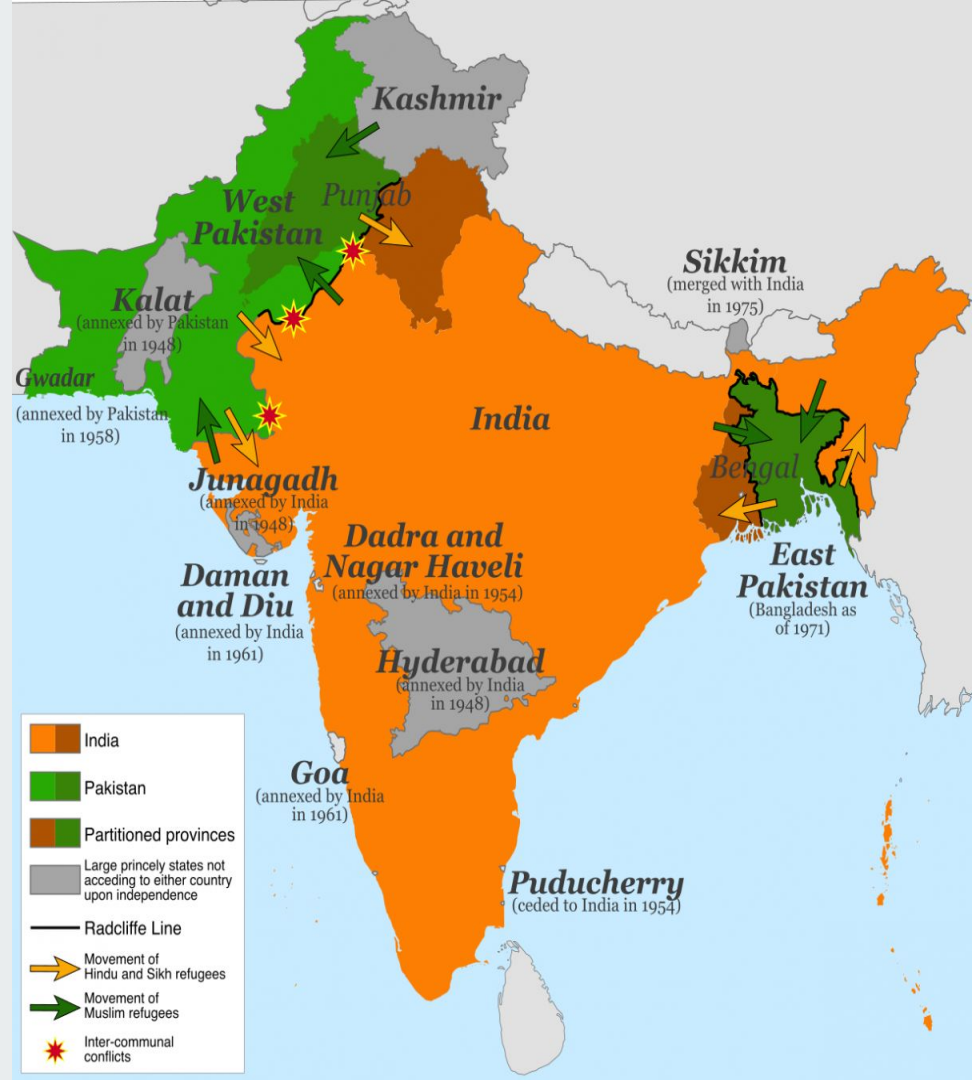
1971

1972

British India placed under Crown rule. The British rule most of the subcontinent.

Independence of Bangladesh from Pakistan.

Partition of India: 1947





Partition of India and Pakistan

- Dissolution of the British Raj.
- Redrawing of political borders → the birth of two independent dominions: India and Pakistan.
- One of the deadliest mass migrations in recorded human history.
- C.R. Perkins: “Set to take effect on August 15, the rapid partition led to a population transfer of unprecedented magnitude, accompanied by devastating communal violence, as some 15,000,000 Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims rushed to cross the hastily demarcated borders before the partition would be complete. Estimates of the number of people who died during the partition range from **200,000 to 2,000,000.**”



Migration to the United States

- 2010 Census: more than 3.4 million people in the United States trace their ancestry to South Asia
- South Asians are one of the fastest growing immigrant groups.
- Noted presence since the 1700s – larger presence since the late 1800s
 - Early settlers from Punjab and Bengal
- Road to citizenship
 - 1923: United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind – South Asians were made ineligible for naturalization
 - 1946: Luce-Celler Act – granted citizenship to South Asians and Filipinos, but limited the number of migrants
 - 1965: Immigration and Nationality Act – heavily influenced by the Civil Rights Movement

Mental Health Considerations

There seems to be several gaps in the scientific literature on the South Asian community, especially in the United States – some of these studies are from the United Kingdom, but there seem to be similarities between South Asian populations in these two countries



Stigma against Mental Health Care

- Stigma is repeatedly identified as a theme in the literature relating to South Asian mental health and serves as a barrier to accessing resources.
- “In one UK study, social stigma associated with mental health disorders was the underlying reason that a group of SAs caring for older adult relatives with dementia did not consult a professional for their relatives’ care” (Karasz et al., 2019).
- “Disclosure of a mental illness will bring shame upon the family, and is a sign of weakness” (Karasz et al., 2019).
- Culture of secrecy around mental illness – usually kept within the family – mental illness is thought to negatively affect family reputation (Leung., Cheung, & Tsui, 2012).
- Mental health is a stigmatized topic among South Asian communities (Islam, Khanlou, & Tamim, 2014)



Stigma against Mental Health Care

Life Circumstances

Poor mental health may be attributed to life circumstances – a normal reaction to stress and adverse life experiences (Karasz et al., 2019)

Religious/Spiritual

- Karma and supernatural forces
- Sins from past lives

Leung., Cheung, & Tsui (2012)

*more applicable to Hindu communities and to older individuals



Depression & Acculturative Stress

- Studies from both the U.K. and the U.S. have identified depression as the most prevalent mental health disorder among the South Asian community.
- Predictors:
 - Older age, literacy, financial difficulties, gender roles, perceptions of illness, social isolation, and poor physical health were contributory factors (Karasz et al., 2019).
 - Language, feelings of isolation, and lack of adherence to mental health treatment regimens, which are often seen as unnecessary, inhibit proper treatment (Karasz et al., 2019).
- Acculturative stress is also positively associated with depressive symptoms. Acculturative stress can often exacerbate symptoms of depression and anxiety. This is further exacerbated by other stressors, including, unemployment and poverty.



Discrimination and Mental Health

- Discrimination is seen as a significant stressor that exacerbates acculturative stress and feelings of isolation, thereby exacerbating symptoms of depression and anxiety
- Nadimpalli et al. (2016): “...self-reported discrimination was positively related to depressive symptoms, anger, and anxiety when controlling for several demographic, acculturation-related, and social support related factors.” Influenced by:
 - Adherence to cultural values
 - Culturally-embedded coping structures
 - Degree of acculturation



Somatization

- Karasz et al. (2019): Within South Asian populations, it is common to interpret mental health symptoms as physical illnesses and not seek psychological help.
 - Can result from abuse
 - Sleep disruptions, bodily pains, GI issues
- Leung, Cheung, Tsui (2012): Mental health symptoms are often translated into physical health symptoms; the latter are viewed as more concrete and more worthy of professional attention



Familial Pressures

- The research also identifies parental and familial pressures as a stressor, especially among South Asian youth (Karasz et al., 2019).
- Culture of secrecy around substance use, dating, sexual activity – particularly among South Asian women.
- Methikalam et al. (2015): “When an individual consistently feels that personal and familial standards are not being met then self-worth and psychological well-being are impacted” → low self-esteem, depression, anxiety.

Clinical recommendations

*These are a collection of approaches I use in my clinical work. They may not be applicable to your work and may not be appropriate for every client.



Clinical approaches for South Asian clients

- Expressing curiosity about the client's journey and about their relationship with their culture
- Nurturing a sense of agency
- Examining early childhood attachments
- Narrative strategies and constructionist approaches
- Examining the tension between cultures
- Building tangible coping structures that rely on culturally-embedded practices



South Asian American Organizations

- **Apna Ghar:** based in Chicago, IL – “provides critical, comprehensive, culturally competent services, and conducts outreach and advocacy across communities to end gender violence.”
- **SAPNA NYC:** primarily serving low-income South Asian immigrant women and families
- **South Asian Council for Social Services:** based in New York – “SACSS’s mission is to empower and integrate underserved South Asians and other immigrants into the economic and civic life of New York.”
- **API Chaya:** based in Seattle, WA – “survivor-led organization focused on serving survivors of sexual violence, human trafficking, and domestic violence from Pacific Islander, Native Hawaiian, Asian, and South Asian communities.”



Further reading & resources

1. [Our Stories: An Introduction to South Asian America; published by SAADA](#)
2. [Annihilation of Caste. B.R. Ambedkar](#)
3. [Building Caste Equity in the U.S. Academia](#)
4. [The Trauma of Caste](#)
5. [1947 Archive](#)
6. [Bengali Harlem](#)
7. [What South Asian Americans Owe to Civil Rights](#)
8. [Where did the Gravity of our Gratitude Go?: The Contributions of Black Americans to South Asians](#)
9. [Pride Month: South Asia's Ancient Queer History into Today](#)
10. [Seattle becomes the first U.S. city to ban caste discrimination](#)



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