
AN OPPORTUNITY TO LEAD: SOUTH ASIAN PHILANTHROPY IN CANADA

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SOUTH ASIANS, ORIGINALLY FROM THE ASIAN SUBCONTINENT – INCLUDING India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka – are some of the most diverse ethnic minorities in Canada as well as some of the most financially stable. Based on the work of the South Asian Philanthropy Project, this article describes the philanthropic practices of the South Asian diaspora, outlining some themes and challenges as well as providing profiles of several Indo-Canadian¹ donors. What emerges is how little we actually know about the South Asian diaspora in Canada in terms of its philanthropy. There is virtually no data on the community's giving and volunteering practices, and the community itself is comparatively new to Canada. While themes are emerging about South Asian philanthropy, no single gift or donor yet stands out, and no overarching community vision or commitment has yet emerged.

The lack of knowledge makes this area an incredible opportunity – both in terms of data collection about the philanthropic practices of South Asian Canadians and in terms of expanding this community's engagement as philanthropists and nonprofit leaders. Philanthropy – i.e., giving and volunteering – is one important measure of the integration of South Asians into mainstream Canadian society. The presence of South Asian donors, board members, and volunteers at nonprofit organizations of all kinds will be a signal of true acceptance into Canadian society and diversity in the nonprofit sector. Understanding the intersection of philanthropy and the South Asian diaspora is crucial for philanthropists, nonprofit managers, giving officers, and government officials – as well as for scholars in the fields of philanthropy, law, social work, and the social sciences.

The South Asian Philanthropy Project (<http://southasianphilanthropy.org>) was founded in April 2008 to act as a bridge between the South Asian diaspora and North America's nonprofit and philanthropic sectors. The project's work to date has consisted of maintaining a website with a listing of organizations focused on South Asia and South Asian diaspora issues; collecting resources to advise donors on giving; publishing a blog with news items, announcements, and commentary; and conducting interviews with community leaders and individual philanthropists.

THE SOUTH ASIAN DIASPORA IN CANADA

While the category of “South Asian” comprises quite a diverse population in Canada, it has become an accepted demographic category and identity, particularly beyond first-generation South Asian immigrants. Although a small number of South Asians came to

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Canada in the early 1900s to work in British Columbia's lumber industry, more arrived after 1960, growing into a diverse population in various professional sectors, including finance, medicine, small business, and service. South Asians now make up about 4% of Canada's population, with a total population of about 1.3 million, according to the 2006 census (Statistics Canada, 2008).

About 70% of South Asians in Canada live in Toronto or Vancouver. In fact, South Asians make up 12% of Toronto's population (City of Toronto, 2006) and more than 8% of Vancouver's (Statistics Canada, 2005). Statistics Canada notes that South Asians embody cultural values such as strong family connections, social networks with other South Asians, and preservation of heritage languages. And while South Asians have very high voting rates – especially when compared to other visible minorities – and an increasing political presence, their giving practices have not yet been analyzed (Statistics Canada, 2005). The economic health of South Asians is above average as compared to other Canadian visible minorities. Several notable South Asian Canadians have built enormous wealth and business success, such as Sir Christopher Ondaatje; Sabi Marwah, CFO of the Bank of Nova Scotia and a director of the *Toronto Star*; Calgary real estate developer Bob Singh Dhillon; and many others.

The South Asian diaspora in North America is strikingly diverse on a variety of axes, such as religion, class, caste, country of origin, language, and immigration status. This vast diversity certainly impacts philanthropy. For example, Ismaili Muslim South Asians give from their personal income as a part of their religious practice, while Hindus often participate actively in a tradition of giving (sometimes known as *dakshina*) that up to this point has been devoted primarily to supporting local temples in the United States and Canada (Anand, 2004). In addition, as with other ethnic groups, socio-economic class can impact the means and manner of giving – with a few millionaire South Asians establishing private foundations or community foundation-based donor advised funds, while less affluent South Asians make smaller gifts through community organizations or religious institutions.

The diaspora also faces certain specific needs from the social services sector, which philanthropy could help to address through new and existing charities and other innovative approaches. These include the need for free or low-cost legal services for new immigrants; for domestic abuse shelters for women and children; for English language instruction and interpretation; and for health care education and services for conditions that disproportionately affect South Asians, such as heart disease and diabetes. Juxtaposing these community-specific needs against available resources highlights the need for more research and education around philanthropy.

A BRIEF PHILANTHROPIC HISTORY

A variety of philanthropic traditions exist among South Asians in North America. As noted above, religious giving is one key known form of South Asian giving. For example, Hindu communities from around the world raised approximately \$40 million for the Swaminarayan Temple in the Greater Toronto Area. Ismaili Muslims, often originally from South Asia (via Africa and/or the U.K.), share a strong religious commitment to charitable giving; construction recently began on the \$300 million Aga Khan Museum

and Ismaili Centre, also in Toronto. Religious centres are also a powerful venue for fundraising for non-religious causes. The Sikh Community of British Columbia raised more than \$1.5 million through the Guru Nanak Sikh Gurdwara Society for Haiti relief efforts within a few weeks of the 2010 earthquake.

South Asians also give to charities in their countries of origin, establishing NGOs to provide education, healthcare, or other services in their hometowns or villages (Niumai, 2009). In addition, South Asians give here in Canada both to mainstream organizations and to those focused on their own ethnic communities. In the first category, the YWCA Vancouver benefits from fundraisers by the Indo-Canadian Business Association, and the Royal Ontario Museum and Art Gallery of Ontario have had very public fundraising campaigns with South Asians such as Arti Chandaria at the helm (Goddard, 2010). One of the most high-profile examples of this trend occurred last year with the announcement that the Canada-India Foundation (CIF) had entered into a joint initiative with the University of Waterloo to establish the Chanchlani India Policy Consortium. Under the agreement, the CIF will contribute up to \$2 million and will raise another \$10 million from government and other private sources to fund endowed chairs, graduate students, lectures, and conferences on India-Canada relations and foreign policy.

Many other organizations are focused on the diversity of Canada's population – such as the United Way, local hospitals and food banks – and all of them benefit from South Asian donors and volunteers. There are other organizations and federations focused primarily on the South Asian diaspora in Canada, such as the Council of Agencies Serving South Asians (CASSA), specialized organizations like the South Asian Visual Arts Centre (SAVAC), community service organizations like the Alliance for South Asian AIDS Prevention (ASAAP), and organizations and shelters focused on South Asian women, such as the South Asian Women's Community Centre of Montréal. While these types of small, community-based organizations receive some support from individual South Asians, much of their funding comes from government agencies.

Many South Asians, much like members of other immigrant groups, also come together to help extended family members emigrate and settle in North America, and to support their children's college and graduate education. And, similar to other ethnic groups, South Asians often send remittances to their families in India, Pakistan, and other countries.

In terms of volunteering, board service is a key metric because of formal or informal requirements to give financially and because of the required commitment of time and resources to the community. In Canada, the Maytree Foundation's DiverseCity initiative found that (as of March 2009) visible minorities are under-represented in the senior-most leadership positions in the Greater Toronto Area: "Just 13% of leaders we analyzed are visible minorities ... Within the largest charities and foundation, visible minorities represented 14% of executives and 18% of board members" (Maytree Foundation, 2009). There is a great need to engage South Asians in this type of philanthropic service, both to diversify civic institutions and to bring the talents of South Asians to bear on broader societal issues.

STATE OF THE RESEARCH FIELD

No one has yet been able to describe empirically the landscape of giving among South Asians in Canada (or the United States). The state of the field in terms of understanding this community's philanthropy appears to be in complete disarray, relying heavily on assumptions and anecdotal evidence. Research does exist at the periphery, primarily related to two themes. First, several scholars have examined the impact of South Asian diaspora populations on giving overseas and the impact of giving from the West to South Asia (Hewa & Hove, 1997; Kulabkar, 2004; Niumai, 2009; Rajan, Pink, & Dow, 2009; Viswanath, 2004). Second, there is some research on diversity in philanthropy writ large. For example, Imagine Canada has collected some data on the giving and volunteering patterns of landed immigrants (Imagine Canada, 1997, 2000). When we look at the samples upon which these and other existing studies are based, we find that South Asians are either not represented to any significant degree, or their representation is unclear. The only comprehensive study of a particular South Asian community has focused on the Pakistani diaspora (Najam, 2007), and other smaller and narrower studies have focused on the Indian-American community or subsets thereof (Anand, 2004).

A few academics are beginning to go beyond these themes and examine other trends in South Asian philanthropy and civic engagement in North America (Sidel, 2003; Venkatesh, 2008). In addition, several nonprofit organizations and professional associations have engaged in some preliminary studies on South Asian giving and expressed an intention to study and promote South Asian philanthropy. For example, the South Asian Philanthropy Project is collecting existing resources and assembling a catalogue of South Asian-focused charitable organizations to aid donors in decision-making. Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy (AAPIP) has supported or published several white papers and reports on Asian-American philanthropy, for example through giving circles (Ho, 2008). Finally, in both Canada and the United States, charities and community organizations serving South Asian constituencies have come together to found various coalitions or federations, such as CASSA – noted above – and the National Coalition for South Asian Organizations (NCSO), in Washington, DC.

PORTRAITS OF SOUTH ASIAN PHILANTHROPISTS

Profiles of the following three Toronto-area Indo-Canadians shed light on some of the themes and challenges outlined further below.² Their stories provide some valuable clues about the direction that South Asian philanthropy might take as the diaspora becomes more established in Canada.

SURESH PAL SINGH BHALLA

Suresh Bhalla and his wife emigrated to Canada 1975. Having worked in banking for over two decades, the Bhallas are now both entrepreneurs in Canada. Bhalla serves as co-chair of the Canada Committee of Human Rights Watch (HRW) and is also a member of the board of the Toronto Community Foundation. In designing his own philanthropy, Bhalla wished to become involved with a cause that was global on one hand, and one that was local on the other.

With regard to the global, Bhalla's middle son studied cultural anthropology and developed what he calls the "social conscience of the family." When his son gave a small donation to Human Rights Watch as a birthday present to his mother, Bhalla was inspired to become more involved with HRW, eventually joining and co-chairing their Canadian board. Bhalla became involved in the Toronto Community Foundation (TCF, 2010) to give back "where one lives and creates one's wealth." He and his family have established two donor-advised funds with TCF (one a flow-through and the other an endowment fund). For the endowment, Bhalla's intention is to invite other wealthy South Asians in Toronto to set up similar funds, so that the collective income could be used to benefit organizations working on issues of domestic violence and alcohol abuse among South Asians. Bhalla and his family have also given money to other causes, including the arts – for example, as a major donor to The Arts of the Sikh Kingdoms exhibit at the Royal Ontario Museum – and relief from natural disasters, such as the Indonesian tsunami and the Gujarat earthquake.

On giving back as an Indo-Canadian, Bhalla says:

We have adopted this country as our own, and ... I take pride in the fact that we [as Indo-Canadians] are doing things we may not have done in India or in the past, but we are trying to step forward to give. That recognition as being part of the South Asian community is also one of my motivations.

ADITYA JHA

Aditya Jha is an entrepreneur in Toronto, owning and heading several companies (Wong, 2010). Jha has established the POA Educational Foundation as the primary vehicle for his philanthropic activities. The foundation focuses on programs in education and entrepreneurship; it has funded large endowments at Ryerson University, George Brown College, and other institutions as well as educational initiatives in India and Nepal. One of Jha's overarching philanthropic interests is quite unique among South Asian immigrants: support for Aboriginal and First Nations communities, specifically entrepreneurship training and investment in social enterprise projects.

Jha believes that his own entrepreneurial background should inform his philanthropic approach – specifically with his focus on business and entrepreneurship. He also openly critiques the new ultra-rich in India and elsewhere for not giving more, inviting South Asians to consider giving at least 10% of their annual income to philanthropy. Jha is committed to giving in Canada and emphasizes that local giving is more important than giving abroad:

I would like to make a case that we should support mainstream Canadian philanthropic projects in a major way, and international projects (as well as Indian projects) with a lesser portion of our total giving ... [L]et's look at the plight of the unfortunate in Canada, and the need [for] philanthropic dollars to support our universities, hospitals, opera, museums, environmental causes, etc.... (Jha 2007)

HARI PANDAY

Hari Panday is the former president and CEO of ICICI Bank Canada and the current president and founder of PanVest Capital Corporation. Panday has been involved in community leadership in the South Asian diaspora in Canada since his arrival in 1975. Like Bhalla and Jha, Panday strongly encourages South Asians to engage in philanthropy in Canada because of the resulting favourable recognition and visibility for the community. For example, Panday was instrumental in the building of a Memorial to Fallen Soldiers at the Canadian Museum of Hindu Civilization, a memorial that honours all Canadian soldiers who have lost their lives, and particularly those who have died in Afghanistan.

The impact of globalization is another theme that surfaces when speaking with Panday. While he was leading ICICI Bank (a financial institution that targets the Indian diaspora, particularly in India, Canada, and the United States), Panday was interested in making philanthropy easier and more accessible. At ICICI ABMs in India, for example, customers can give directly to one of many approved charities; Panday worked on bringing this capacity to Canada as well. ICICI Bank also supports ICICI Communities, a vehicle for donor-advised funds and a successful microfinance operation.

EMERGING THEMES

The integration of South Asians into Canada's philanthropic sector will yield resources and talents to make the sector stronger. Through the work of the South Asian Philanthropy Project – research, interviews, and correspondence – three major themes are emerging about this diaspora's philanthropy: diversity in charitable motivation, the application of business principles to philanthropy, a focus on religious giving, and giving abroad.

Just as the motivations for philanthropy in other populations are incredibly diverse, South Asian Canadians, too, give to charity for many reasons. These include the impact that their giving will have on identified needs here and abroad; a sense of connection or shared heritage with their countries of origin or diaspora communities abroad; and public and community recognition for their giving, particularly to raise the profile of their ethnic community among the mainstream population. Due to globalization, there is increased movement among South Asian Canadians between North America and South Asia, sometimes via the United Kingdom or Africa as well. This has created innovative philanthropic projects, including some that incorporate volunteers – often young people seeking new experiences.

Another common thread is the attraction of South Asian donors and volunteers to the application of business principles to the nonprofit sector. Many Indo-Canadians express a wish to see philanthropy become more effective, more entrepreneurial, and more innovative. One side effect of this interest in “philanthrocapitalism” is an entrepreneurial drive to create new NGOs for various causes, particularly to channel resources from North America to South Asia – sometimes without strategic thinking or collaboration. This drive in particular can lead to certain challenges, as outlined below.

Religious giving and giving abroad to countries in South Asia appear to be the two major philanthropic interests of the Indo-Canadian diaspora currently, although that hypoth-

esis is based primarily on anecdotal evidence, news stories about major gifts and initiatives, and interviews by the South Asian Philanthropy Project. Religious giving strengthens community ties among first-generation immigrants to Canada and provides a forum for intra-community recognition. Giving abroad honours the very strong networks between Canadian immigrants and their families or communities “back home” in the subcontinent. These two trends in particular may decline in prominence as the South Asian diaspora grows and puts down roots in Canada with younger generations. A brief examination of charities serving South Asian communities in the Greater Toronto Area, for example, reveals that most of their funding comes from government agencies, not private donations. This may change as younger South Asians become professionalized in Canada and seek out organizations catering to their established communities.

POTENTIAL CHALLENGES

Several challenges are emerging from this very early look at philanthropy among the South Asian diaspora. The first is grounded in the incredible diversity among South Asians in Canada. As described above, the community comes from many countries of origin and many religious backgrounds. South Asians in Canada speak many languages and have different generational interests and values as well. Gender diversity and integrating women into philanthropic leadership is not always a priority for the community, and this should be addressed as well as clarifying shared values. Bridging divides on gender, generation, and other axes will be crucial to celebrating a community-based philanthropic identity, since the category of “South Asian” itself is quite new and in some senses artificial.

Another challenge is a lack of leadership and vision around philanthropy in the South Asian community in Canada. In many ways, South Asian communities lack a “meta-narrative,” or overarching shared story about their philanthropic values, in contrast to Jewish-Canadian or African-American communities, for example, which have developed large-scale foundations and organizations to reflect their diversity in giving. South Asians across Canada need to define their own priorities by debating and defining the answers to questions such as: What does philanthropy really mean? Why is philanthropy important? What mark do we want to make as a community? There may be no unified answer, but an open conversation, forum, and debate would help more philanthropic leaders define their own goals and become role models.

There is also a need for more information about philanthropy in the South Asian community. The lack of data about giving among South Asian Canadians means that everyone (donors, fundraisers, foundation giving officers, nonprofit leaders) is making assumptions based purely on anecdotal evidence. More data will help define how best to measure South Asian philanthropy and what metrics are most important to know and monitor over time – for example, dollars given, hours volunteered, impact of a gift, percentage of household income donated, and so on.

Finally, the last challenge is perhaps the greatest: there is an immense need for education for South Asian philanthropists so that their giving and volunteering is more considered, more rooted in a strategic impact, and more informed in terms of the needs being served. Perhaps this challenge is the same as that which faces the Canadian non-

profit sector more broadly, but education could be tailored to the needs of the South Asian diaspora in particular. Having data about actual giving, capacity, and needs both among South Asians within Canada and abroad could encourage collaboration among South Asian philanthropists, many of whom support their own home villages or personal causes without investigating potential duplication. This lack of consideration with regard to overseas gifts is of particular concern – it may mean that giving from Canada to South Asia is highly inefficient and uncoordinated. Establishing federations of South Asian donors, modelled after organizations like Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy (AAPIP) in the United States, would be a good start to addressing this challenge.

Increased donor education would also help improve the governance of many small NGOs, both those serving South Asian communities in Canada and those serving constituencies abroad. Despite recommended best practices, many founders of South Asian charities continue to be involved as managers and board members, and many boards often have a more operational rather than oversight role. Many South Asian community organizations do not have fundraising training and do not feel confident about asking donors for individual gifts, relying instead on short-term government funding that is not sustainable.

CONCLUSION

Giving locally (i.e., in Canada) versus giving abroad (i.e., to countries of origin in South Asia) is a major concern for South Asian donors like Bhalla, Jha, and many others as well as a concern for leaders in Canada's nonprofit sector. News stories, fundraising campaigns, and efforts at board recruitment targeting Indo-Canadians demonstrate that South Asians are becoming part of the diverse population that makes up Canada. And with rapid globalization, the distinction between "here" and "there" itself is disappearing, revealing social needs that cross borders – such as those of Sri Lankan refugees – and inspiring some philanthropists living in the subcontinent to give to organizations located in North America, such as Ratan Tata and Anand Mahindra's recent gifts to Harvard University.

Global developments bring immense opportunities for philanthropic innovation, and as noted above, South Asians in particular are drawn to entrepreneurial and business-minded approaches to giving and volunteering. Such a business approach deserves some reconsideration on the part of South Asians in North America. While this approach is certainly captivating given the life histories and success stories of many South Asian immigrants, increased donor education would probably reveal many social problems that cannot be solved within such a paradigm. Also, the South Asian community here and abroad – like so many other diaspora communities – faces issues of social justice that a philanthrocapitalist model simply cannot address. South Asians need to create new metrics by which we define philanthropy's success, beyond traditional profit/efficiency/business measures.

Finally, I would like to conclude with a call to action. There is an immense opportunity for nonprofit leaders, philanthropists, and scholars of South Asian persuasion and beyond to collect, analyze, and disseminate data and research on the South Asian di-

aspora's patterns of giving and service. Such research and education will lead to a better understanding of civic participation and changing demographics in North America. South Asians are a crucial ethnic group for Canada, bringing great wealth and talent to this country. We should all be interested in learning more about South Asians and engaging more with them around issues of philanthropy, as their participation is directly connected to the health of our communities.

NOTES

1. I use the terms "South Asian" and "Indo-Canadian" rather interchangeably throughout this article as they are used in the mainstream Canadian media, although South Asian is certainly more precise given the many countries of origin represented in the diaspora.
2. There certainly are other South Asian philanthropic leaders outside of the Toronto area and from other countries of origin in South Asia, but these three donors have spoken with the South Asian Philanthropy Project.

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