South Asian Americans in Advertising

Shalini Shankar, Northwestern University

South Asian Americans have had relatively little visibility in American advertising until fairly recently. Contributing factors to this lacuna include the way early South Asian immigrants were regarded in early 20th century America, when the Indian Subcontinent was still under British Rule.

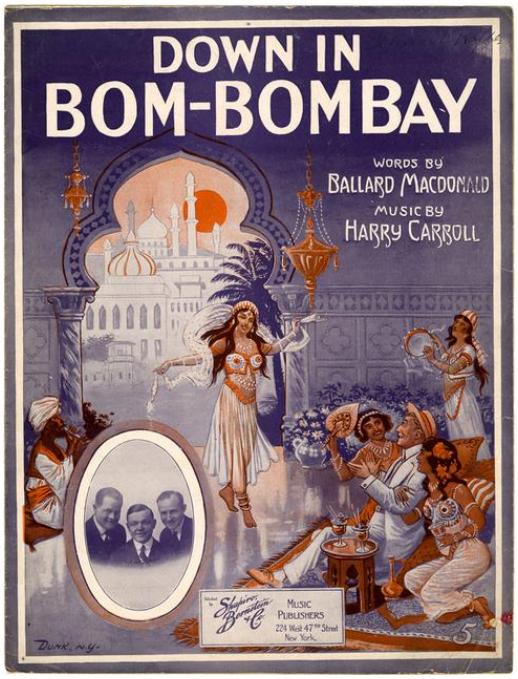
South Asian immigration to the US began in earnest at the turn of the 20th century; the preceding saw fewer than 700 arrivals. In advertisements, South Asia was considered an exotic and far off locale, with little knowledge of what day-to-day life entailed.

The "far corners of the earth," as the ad for a telecommunications company touts, contained a wealth of curious human and animal life, and a mahout driving an elephant with a coolie in front of him represents South Asia. The ways in which these ads depict South Asia as a faraway land parallel how early South Asians were received in the United States.

The first wave of immigrants began around 1901, when men of Sikh, Muslim, and Hindu faith were generally lumped together under the category of "Hindoo." Although the number of South Asians arriving was considerably less than Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino immigrants, they were nonetheless targets of various types of racial discrimination. Scholars speculate that their turbans and beards elicited more prejudice than did Japanese immigrants, and that their illiteracy worsened their status in ways that resulted in social isolation and lower pay than their fellow Asian laborers. Headlines in various California newspapers decried the economic and social threat they posed, violence soon erupted against them, and realtors in some regions banded together to not sell them real estate. While they were thought to be unable to assimilate, they were also not considered "Asiatic" like the Chinese and Japanese; despite this in-between status, they were eventually rendered ineligible for citizenship. Immigration of families, wives, and brides was also prohibited, as was land ownership and marrying whites, and this resulted in some South Asian men marrying Mexican American women and to have families and pass along their holdings and assets.

During this period, variants of the term Hindoo appeared in ads, and the iconic South Asian was bearded and turbaned, as in the ad below. Notably, the script that appears under the image "Hindostani" is possibly Urdu represented in Arabic script, but certainly not Devanagari, the script in which Hindi, the most widely spoken language in India. Due to this marginal status and concentration on the West Coast, relatively few images of South Asian Americans appear in early advertisements. Those that do harken back to distant lands and far away cultures that bore little relevance to everyday American life.

Like much of the Orientalist imagery of this time, the East was regarded as a place of curious heathens. In this McLaughlin Coffee advertisement, a baby version of Lord Krishna shares a peaceful coexistence with the otherwise feared cobra, a play on Rudyard Kipling's classic *Jungle Book* imagery.



The mystique and hedonism depicted in this imagery generally features light-skinned women entertainers and dark-skinned musicians and attendants for white patrons, as in this poster for musical.

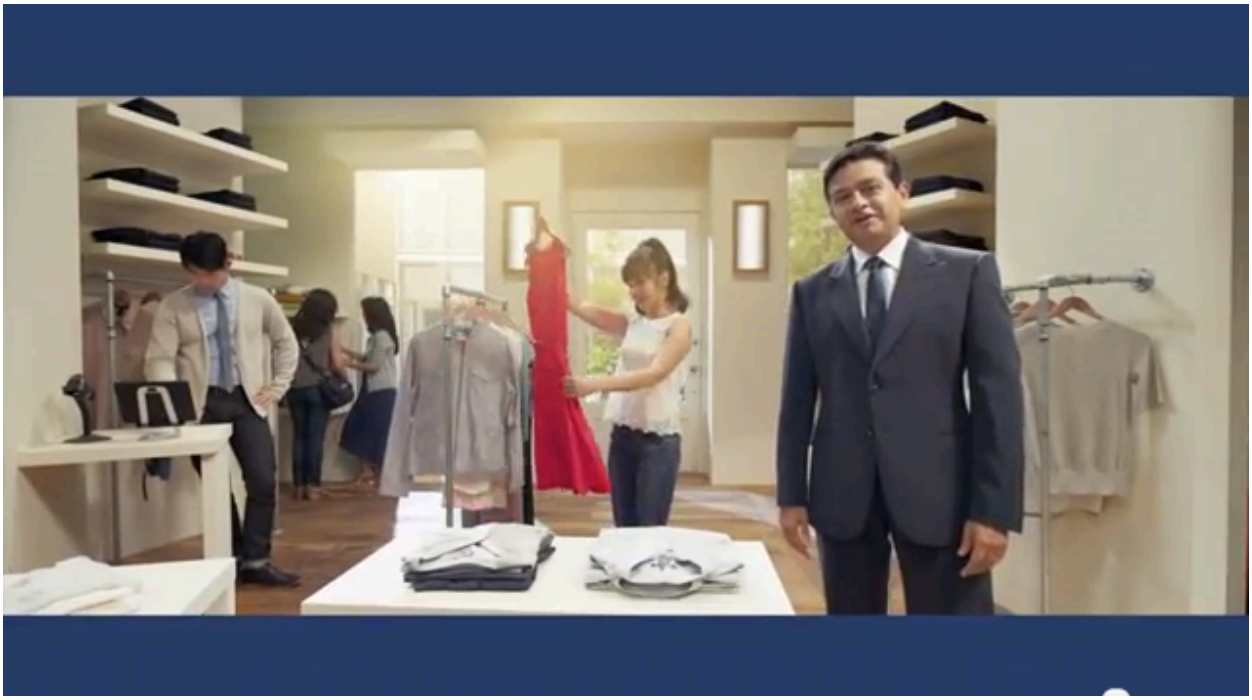
In the mid- to late twentieth century, several American immigration acts contributed to a rapid growth of South Asian American communities, with the largest wave of immigrants arriving post-1965. At this time, the US passed the Hart-Cellar Act and established a system of preferred categories for immigration, including highly skilled labor that the United States needed, and allowed family unification. Like Chinese and Japanese Americans, South Asian Americans have benefitted from being labeled a "model minority," a term introduced by the New York Times and US News and World Report. Although scholars have disputed this generalizing categorization by noting important differences of class and education status, many have thrived under its auspices, especially in industries such as medicine, engineering, and high technology.

Numerous stereotypes of South Asian Americans appear in advertising, generally forwarding the notion South Asian Americans are either uncultured newcomers or technology mavens.

Recent examples include ads by telecommunications company "Metro PCS," in which two mean speaking with heavy Indian accents engage in buffoonish antics.

Another for "PopChips" features Ashton Kutcher performing his version of an Indian accent while dressed in brownface as a Bollywood producer.

Other general market ads have capitalized on the prestigious image of well-educated South Asian Americans and place them in positions of authority and knowledge, such spots for "FiberOne" bars, in which a knowledgeable, calm South Asian American salesman offers samples to off-beat tasters.



In IBM's recent campaign to "Build a Smarter Planet," many of the IBMers, as they call themselves, are South Asian Americans who speak prestigious forms of South Asian English.

In a different vein, niche advertising has more directly appealed to South Asian Americans as consumers. Since 1980, when the US census featured the aggregate category of "Asian American," advertising and marketing executives started to target South Asian Americans in direct ways through "in-language" (Hindi or South Asian English) and "in-culture" ads. These ads tend to depict South Asian Americans in ordinary, everyday situations.

In this ad for Nationwide Insurance, they highlight the rapid nature of life changes, showing a girl with fingerpaint alongside a woman with her wedding henna.

Many feature themes of family and intergenerational connections between parents and children, and in all, tend to highlighting cultural differences in a way more relevant to South Asian Americans. They may also feature prominent South Asian festivals such as Diwali and Eid.

Increasingly these ads additionally try to appeal to younger audiences by featuring young South Asian Americans in modern lifestyles, such as these three girls who meet a State Farm agent, and all of them speak American accented English. While the crossover potential of these ads is still uncertain, they do seem to present a more thoughtful image of South Asian Americans, a trend general market advertising will hopefully follow.