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“Hindu Toilers” and “White Workmen”: South Asian Labor during the Urbanization and Industrialization of the Bay Area

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“Hindu Toilers” and “White Workmen”: South Asian Labor during the Urbanization and  
Industrialization of the Bay Area

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Environmental Design 195B

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## Introduction

Over several days in November 1907, white workers attacked South Asian workers in Stege (present day Richmond), California. An article in the *San Francisco Call* articulates a rise in unemployment among white workers and a concurrent fear of South Asian workers undercutting wages as the motives behind the violence. White workers were unable to find work in Richmond, and this growing immigrant group was their scapegoat. South Asian workers came to Stege to work in the California Cap Company (also referred to as California Cap Works), and soon diffused into nearby factories and lumber yards.<sup>1</sup>

This was not the first time that white workers tried to oust South Asian workers. Racist violence against South Asian workers was happening all over the West Coast, including in Washington state just 2 months prior, during the infamous “Bellingham Race Riots”.<sup>2</sup> South Asian immigration was increasing in this era, and with their arrival grew misgivings about their presence in the United States, especially among white, working class men.<sup>3</sup> Hundreds of men from Punjab arrived in Bellingham during the summer of 1907. This threatened the existing white labor unions, who rallied around anti-Asian rhetoric on Labor Day (September 1, 1907). A few days later, South Asian workers were expelled from their homes. Hundreds of them had to leave the city. Some went North, to Vancouver, and some went South to Oakland. From there,

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<sup>1</sup> “White Workmen Protest Against Hindu Toilers,” *San Francisco Call*, November 15, 1907, California Digital Newspaper Collection, <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=SFC19071115.2.68&e=-----en--20--1--txt-txIN----->.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Lane Gallagher, “1907 Bellingham Mob Forced East Indian Mill Workers out of Town,” *The Bellingham Herald*, October 16, 2019; Rajani Kanta Das, “Chapter XI: Principal Problems” in *Hindustani Workers on the Pacific Coast* (Walter De Gruyter & Co., 1923), 111.; Manish Chalana, “Whither the ‘Hindu Invasion’? South Asians in the Pacific Northwest of the United States, 1907-1930,” *International Journal of Regional and Local History*, April 23, 2021, 1-4, 6-8, <https://doi.org/10.1080/20514530.2021.1908719>.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Englesberg, “The Bellingham “Anti-Hindu” Riot,” in *Our Stories: An Introduction to South Asian America*, (South Asian American Digital Archive, 2021), 28-35.

they dispersed to towns nearby to find work. A few of them saw the burgeoning industrial region of Stege, California as an ideal place to find work.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> “White Workmen Protest Against Hindu Toilers.”; Chalana, “Whither the ‘Hindu Invasion’? South Asians in the Pacific Northwest of the United States, 1907-1930,” 1-4, 6-8.; “[1907] White men attacked South Asian factory and lumber yard workers in Stege, which is in present-day Richmond...,” Anirvan Chatterjee and Barnali Ghosh, “Immigration, Immigrants, and Visitors (in Progress),” Online Archive of Bay Area South Asian History, Berkeley South Asian History Archive, n.d., <http://archive.berkeleysouthasian.org/immigration.html>.

## Methods and Significance

The research for this project was drawn primarily from historical archives and census data. The archives consist of newspapers, books published during the time, and pamphlets. Most archives were made available through the UC Berkeley library. Additionally, reports from researchers at the El Cerrito Historical Society and books on South Asian History were used.

Who were the people motivating such zealous violence? The term “South Asian” is currently used in academic contexts to describe people from modern-day India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Maldives, Burma, Sri Lanka, and Bhutan.<sup>5</sup> During the early twentieth century, South Asians were referred to as: “East Indian”, “Hindu”, “Goan”, “Mohammedan”, “Muslim”, “Bengali”, “Lascars”, and “Sikh”.<sup>6</sup> There were three factors complicating the ways this group was identified. The term “Indian” was used to refer to the indigenous communities in North America, the current boundaries of Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh constituted the British colony of India, and they were not Christian. US Americans were ignorant about their religious diversity. The religious ignorance is especially noticeable in the newspaper coverage about South Asians - where Muslim and Sikh people are referred to unilaterally as “Hindus”.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Samip Mallick and Nivetha Karthikeyan, “Introduction,” in *Our Stories: An Introduction to South Asian America*, (South Asian American Digital Archive, 2021), xxxii-xxxiii.; Suzanne McMahon, “Introduction,” *Echoes of Freedom: South Asian Pioneers in California, 1899-1965*, 2020, <https://guides.lib.berkeley.edu/echoes-of-freedom/introduction>.; Vivek Bald, *Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America* (Harvard University Press, 2013), ix.

<sup>6</sup> Joanne Rubio, “Hindus in El Cerrito - Stege, Richmond,” 2024.; Rajender Kaur, “Sick Keesar’s Petition to Benjamin Franklin,” in *Our Stories: An Introduction to South Asian America* (South Asian American Digital Archive, 2021), 9.; “Victims of Works At Stege Are Interred,” *Richmond Daily Independent*, September 29, 1914, Richmond Museum of History and Culture, Richmond, CA.; “Stege Cap Plant Nearly Wrecked By Awful Explosion,” *Richmond Daily Independent*, September 25, 1914, Richmond Museum of History and Culture, Richmond, CA.; “Mohammedan Rites Are Observed at Funeral of Explosion Victims,” *Richmond Daily Independent*, September 28, 1914, Richmond Museum of History and Culture, Richmond, CA.

<sup>7</sup> “Victims of Works At Stege Are Interred.”; “Stege Cap Plant Nearly Wrecked By Awful Explosion.”; “Mohammedan Rites Are Observed at Funeral of Explosion Victims.”; “White Workmen Protest Against Hindu

Personally, I am a South Asian with a caste-privileged background. I have been living in the United States for 5 years, and have noticed that conversations about South Asia, especially in the Bay Area, center on wealthy groups of people. My motivation for conducting this project was to find out what the origins of this narrative are by figuring out what early South Asian immigrants in this region were doing.

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Toilers,”; “Hindu Gives Detailed Story of How He Killed Rosa Domingo at Stege,” *Richmond Daily Independent*, October 18, 1913, Richmond Museum of History and Culture, Richmond, CA.



## Early Twentieth Century South Asian American Labor Immigration

The unfree labor regime of the British empire strongly shaped the geography of the South Asian diaspora. British governance made life very difficult for people to stay in the colony of India. There were continuous droughts and famines. People worked for low wages and were taxed highly. South Asians were politically frustrated with the colonization of their land.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the British military recruited South Asians, forcing them to travel. Additionally, the British government created new infrastructure; roads and railways, which enabled swifter transportation of people, or personnel.<sup>9</sup> These factors enabled, encouraged, and pushed people away from the subcontinent. They ended up all around the world, because the British Empire was enormous. In Central and South America, South Asian indentured labor replaced enslaved Africans after the British Empire abolished slavery in 1833. As workers on tea, cotton, and sugar plantations, their conditions were often no different from the enslaved Africans.<sup>10</sup> In North America, immigration of South Asians began in full swing in the nineteenth century. Prior to that, there were very few recorded incidents of South Asians arriving.

The current historical consensus is that they started arriving in the eighteenth century as “lascars” (sailors) and servants. There is evidence for this in books and newspapers. There were mentions of “East Indian servants”<sup>11</sup> in the colonial American newspapers. “Lascars” had

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<sup>8</sup> Chalana, “Whither the ‘Hindu Invasion’? South Asians in the Pacific Northwest of the United States, 1907-1930,” 4-6.; Suzanne McMahon, “Chapter 1: Punjab, 1899,” *Echoes of Freedom: South Asian Pioneers in California, 1899-1965*, 2020, <https://guides.lib.berkeley.edu/echoes-of-freedom/punjab>.; Jogesh Chander Misrow, “East Indian Immigration on the Pacific Coast” (Stanford University, 1915), <https://www.saada.org/item/20120123-599>, 1-9.

<sup>9</sup> McMahon, “Chapter 1: Punjab, 1899.”; Manu Karuka, “Railroad Colonialism,” in *Empire’s Tracks*, 1st ed., Indigenous Nations, Chinese Workers, and the Transcontinental Railroad (University of California Press, 2019), 40–59, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvd1c7m4.7>.

<sup>10</sup> “Indentured Labour from South Asia (1834-1917),” n.d., <https://www.striking-women.org/module/map-major-south-asian-migration-flows/indentured-labour-south-asia-1834-1917>.

<sup>11</sup> Kaur, “Sick Keesar’s Petition to Benjamin Franklin,” 10.

become iconic characters in the eighteenth and nineteenth century urban landscape, appearing in Herman Melville's works of fiction.<sup>12</sup> In the 1850s and onwards, several newspapers reported on South Asian “lascars” present in Californian cities.<sup>13</sup>

“Lascar” was an orientaling term used to describe men from South Asia, Southeast Asia and the Middle East working on European ships as sailors or in other military capacities.<sup>14</sup> South Asian “lascars” were employed by the East India Company on a contractual basis. They could be made to work on any British ship for up to three years. The flexibility of their work arrangement resulted in their traveling to many parts of the world, including North America. In the British colonial economy, “lascars” engaged in arduous, underpaid work, handling coal to power the ships.<sup>15</sup> They were mostly Muslim, coming from present-day Bangladesh and Pakistan, and some were children. Vivek Bald writes about their history at length in *Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America*, focusing on Muslim sailors from present-day Bangladesh “jumping ship”<sup>16</sup> from British steamships, and finding work in cities of the Northeast and Southern US. The sailors would desert their ship and find better paid, and less strenuous work. They worked in shipbuilding, steel, and munitions industries. Informal networks between them enabled them to arrive in larger numbers, forming a distinct part of the heavy industry labor force. As a class of labor, they were at the mercy of their employers, who viewed them as expendable and cheap.

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<sup>12</sup> Kaur, “Sick Keesar’s Petition to Benjamin Franklin,” 9.

<sup>13</sup> Chatterjee and Ghosh, “Immigration, Immigrants, and Visitors (in Progress).”

<sup>14</sup> Kaur, “Sick Keesar’s Petition to Benjamin Franklin,” 9.

<sup>15</sup> Vivek Bald, “Jumping Ship,” in *Our Stories: An Introduction to South Asian America* (South Asian American Digital Archive, 2021), 11–15.

<sup>16</sup> Bald, “Jumping Ship,” 11-15.

In addition to the people working on ships, South Asian soldiers and policemen were scattered across the British Empire. Policemen were employed in Shanghai, Hong Kong, Penang, and other trans-Pacific ports.<sup>17</sup> People of the Sikh faith tended to join the army and interact with soldiers abroad. These soldiers were involved in suppressing the Boxer Uprising,<sup>18</sup> during which they learned of West Coast job opportunities through their fellow soldiers. They grew particularly familiar with Canada, as many of them had to travel through it in 1897 following Queen Victoria's Jubilee Celebrations.<sup>19</sup> This exposed them, and consequently, other Punjabi people, to international opportunities, especially on the West Coast of North America.

North America was not welcoming to Asian immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century. For the previous few decades, white labor unions and interest groups felt threatened by Asian immigrant workers undercutting wages and competing with them for jobs.<sup>20</sup> They advocated successfully for tightening restrictions against Asian immigrants. This was especially true for East Asian people in the US, who were more populous in the late nineteenth century. Their organizing culminated in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which was passed to prevent Chinese people from entering the United States. It achieved the intended result; Chinese immigration subsequently slowed down.<sup>21</sup> Restricting South Asian immigration was much more difficult. Legally, South Asians were British subjects. As per the Commercial Treaty of 1815,

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<sup>17</sup> Misrow, "East Indian Immigration on the Pacific Coast," 2.

<sup>18</sup> Misrow, "East Indian Immigration on the Pacific Coast," 2.

<sup>19</sup> Chalana, "Whither the 'Hindu Invasion'? South Asians in the Pacific Northwest of the United States, 1907-1930," 4-6.; "Chapter I: Immigration," in *Hindustani Workers on the Pacific Coast*, by Rajani Kanta Das (Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1923), 3-16,

[https://www.google.com/books/edition/Hindustani\\_Workers\\_on\\_the\\_Pacific\\_Coast/t9shAAAAMAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=inauthor:%22Rajani+Kanta+Das%22&printsec=frontcover](https://www.google.com/books/edition/Hindustani_Workers_on_the_Pacific_Coast/t9shAAAAMAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=inauthor:%22Rajani+Kanta+Das%22&printsec=frontcover).

<sup>20</sup> "Chinese Exclusion Act," n.d., <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1866-1898/chinese-immigration>.

<sup>21</sup> "Chinese Exclusion Act."

there was “liberty of residence” between the British Empire and the United States,<sup>22</sup> so South Asians could freely travel to the United States. This was much to the chagrin of the white US American populace, especially among their labor unions.<sup>23</sup> As mentioned above, in 1907, when South Asians arrived in larger numbers, vitriolic rhetoric that culminated in violence against them spread amongst the labor unions.

The legal establishment also reflected these hostilities. At the federal level, restrictions on South Asian immigration were tightening. Informally, immigration officials were encouraged to prevent South Asians from entering the US.<sup>24</sup> They would claim that South Asians were likely to become “public charges”<sup>25</sup> - i.e. depend on the state for survival, and turn them away.

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<sup>22</sup> “The Hindoo Question,” Richmond Daily Independent (Reprinted from San Francisco Chronicle), November 1, 1913, Richmond Museum of History and Culture, Richmond, CA.; “Commercial Treaty with England” (1815), <https://www.loc.gov/resource/rbpe.19003200/>.

<sup>23</sup> “The Hindoo Question.”; *Proceedings of the Asiatic Exclusion League 1908-1912*, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.c044982412&seq=341&q1=hindu>, 14, 215, 247, 266-7, 341-7, 369-377, 442-5, 497-499, 513, 546-7, 583-4, 679, 711.; David Cahn, “The 1907 Bellingham Riots in Historical Context,” *The Seattle Civil Rights and Labor History Project*, 2008, [https://depts.washington.edu/civilr/bham\\_history.htm](https://depts.washington.edu/civilr/bham_history.htm).

<sup>24</sup> “Chapter I: Immigration,” 12-16; Chalana, “Whither the ‘Hindu Invasion’? South Asians in the Pacific Northwest of the United States, 1907-1930,” 4-6.

<sup>25</sup> “Hindu Immigration Hearings,” February 13, 1914, <https://www.saada.org/item/20120113-581>, 6. Seema Sohi, “Introduction,” in *Our Stories: An Introduction to South Asian America* (South Asian American Digital Archive, 2021), 5.; Misrow, “East Indian Immigration on the Pacific Coast,” 32.

Table VIII  
East Indians debarred from entering the United States<sup>15</sup>

Year	Likely to become public charge.	Surgeon's Certificate of mental or physical defect which may affect alien's ability to earn a living.	Dangerous diseases		Contract Labor.	Polygamist	Geographically Excluded	Other Causes	Total
			Trachoma	Others					
1907 <sup>16</sup>	286	—	102	—	29	—	—	—	417
1908	286	107	192	1	20	—	—	—	606
1909	146	54	94	2	17	16	—	—	329
1910	200	16	161	7	7	18	—	—	409
1911	536	34	105	151	8	27	—	—	861
1912	58	5	7	22	4	3	—	—	99
1913	159	8	18	23	23	3	—	—	234
1914	115	6	19	4	11	2	—	—	157
1915	211	14	42	28	3	2	—	—	300
1916	36	3	2	1	1	1	—	—	44
1917	17	1	—	5	—	1	—	—	24
1918	4	—	—	—	—	—	13	—	17
1919	—	—	—	—	—	—	18	—	18
1920	2	—	—	—	—	—	22	4	28
	2056	248	662	244	123	73	53	4	3 543
			906						

<sup>15</sup> Adapted from Table XVIII of Annual Reports of the Commissioner General of Immigration.

<sup>16</sup> Table III, Report of the Commissioner General of Immigration for 1907-08, pp. 16-17.

Figure 1. Table showing South Asians who were prevented from entering the United States and why, in “Chapter I: Immigration,” in *Hindustani Workers on the Pacific Coast*, by Rajani Kanta Das (Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1923), 13.

In 1917, the U.S government enacted the Asiatic Barred Zone Act, which officially prevented South (and other) Asians from coming to the US. It likened Asian immigrants to “alcoholics, “professional beggars”, and the insane”.<sup>26</sup> A few years after this act, in 1923, living in the US became more complicated for South Asians. Citizenship was possible for “free white persons”.<sup>27</sup> The racial categories at the time were very slippery. There wasn’t an obvious category for South Asians. Some judges ruled that South Asians were white, and approved their naturalization.<sup>28</sup> World War I veteran Bhagat Singh Thind naturalization petition went to the Supreme Court. Rooted in the violent idea that being “high caste” brought proximity to whiteness, Thind argued that he was racially white, and should thus be allowed citizenship.<sup>29</sup> The

<sup>26</sup> Bald, *Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America*, 2.

<sup>27</sup> Philip Deslippe, “Bhagat Singh Thind in Jail,” February 19, 2018, <https://www.saada.org/tides/article/bhagat-singh-thind-in-jail>.

<sup>28</sup> Chalana, “Whither the ‘Hindu Invasion’? South Asians in the Pacific Northwest of the United States, 1907-1930,” 12-15.

<sup>29</sup> “1923 Thind v. US,” n.d., <https://immigrationhistory.org/item/thind-v-united-states%E2%80%8B/>.

ruling was unfavorable to him, and reversed the naturalization of 50 Indian Americans who had been approved before him. *Thind v. USA* made South Asian residents of the US' positions insecure, and prevented them from putting down roots in the country.<sup>30</sup> Future bills lifted racial restrictions on immigration to some extent, on the stipulation that immigrants could bring a certain type of expertise to the country.<sup>31</sup>

Immigration to Canada came with its own set of complications. As part of the British Empire, they could not ban South Asians outright.<sup>32</sup> They passed legislation that targeted South Asians without naming them. In 1908, the Canadian government mandated a "continuous journey" policy for incoming immigrants.<sup>33</sup> This legislation barred those who did not directly come from their country of origin/citizenship to Canada. Since there were no direct shipping services from South Asia to Canada, this served as a clandestine way of preventing South Asians from entering Canada. In 1913, they made labor immigration to British Columbia illegal as well. Since European immigrants typically did not arrive in Canada through British Columbia, this was another subversive method used by the Canadian government to shape its racial makeup. This encouraged workers to go to the US instead.

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<sup>30</sup> Chalana, "Whither the 'Hindu Invasion'? South Asians in the Pacific Northwest of the United States, 1907-1930," 18-19; Bald, *Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America*, 5.

<sup>31</sup> Bald, *Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America*, 5.; "Hart-Celler Act," 1965, <https://immigrationhistory.org/item/hart-celler-act/>; Chalana, "Whither the 'Hindu Invasion'? South Asians in the Pacific Northwest of the United States, 1907-1930," 7.

<sup>32</sup> "The Hindoo Question.," Commercial Treaty with England.

<sup>33</sup> Sohi, "Introduction," 5.; Chalana, "Whither the 'Hindu Invasion'? South Asians in the Pacific Northwest of the United States, 1907-1930," 5.

Official arrivals of South Asians began in 1899, with immigration gradually increasing until a sharp increase in 1907, when 1072 people were admitted.<sup>34</sup> Between 1906 and 1917, about 8000 immigrants arrived.<sup>35</sup>

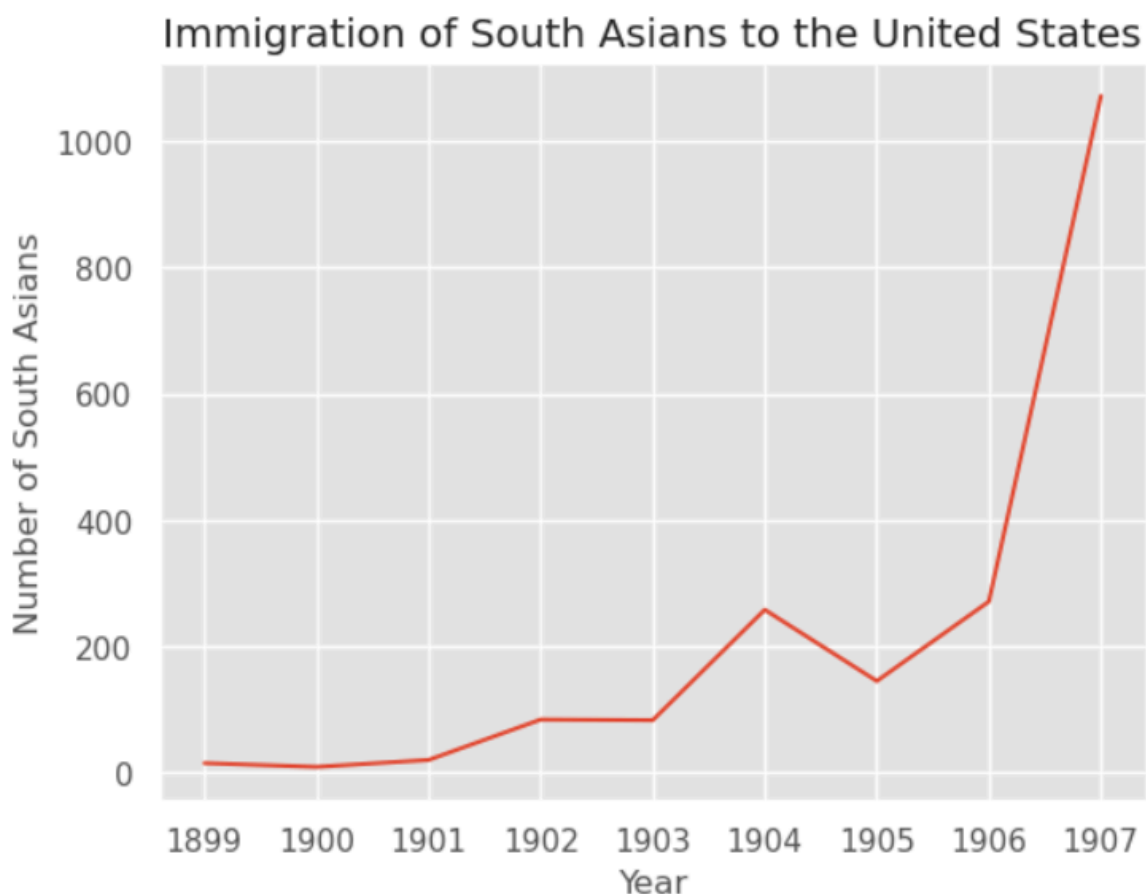


Figure 2. Graph showing the arrival of South Asians in the United States each year, from 1899 to 1907, data from Rajani Kanta Das, “Chapter I: Immigration,,” *Hindustani Workers on the Pacific Coast*, 10.

Immigration of South Asians to California happened through Angel Island, San Francisco, and from northern regions (Oregon, Washington, and British Columbia). The typical steamship route was from Kolkata to Hong Kong, to Angel Island. In terms of their religion, a vast majority (some estimates say 85-90%)<sup>36</sup> were Sikh, and the rest were Muslim. There were

<sup>34</sup> “Chapter I: Immigration,” 10.

<sup>35</sup> Sohi, “Introduction,” 5.

<sup>36</sup> McMahan, “Chapter 1: Punjab, 1899.”

very few Hindus.<sup>37</sup> Almost all immigrants were young men. Some were married, and sought to send remittances to their families back home.<sup>38</sup> Most were from the Punjab region, which is in present-day Pakistan and India. A few were from other parts of North India, Bengal, or Afghanistan.<sup>39</sup>

Workers were drawn to the West Coast, because it was rapidly industrializing. Industrialization in the West Coast was spurred by the construction of the transcontinental railroad.<sup>40</sup> In the early nineteenth century, there was no convenient, fast connection between the East and West Coasts of the United States. There was more impetus for West Coast connectivity, especially after gold was discovered at Sutter's Mill.<sup>41</sup> The Gold Rush of 1849 spurred widespread migration towards the West Coast. Settlers were enraptured by the thought of untapped wealth, ripe for the taking. Due to this, and other developments in industrializing America, the transcontinental railroad began construction in the 1860s.<sup>42</sup> The political will propelling this project forward required that a vast quantity of labor went into it. This labor consisted of a large set of communities: formerly enslaved people, former Civil War soldiers, Irish and German immigrants, and notably, a vast number of Chinese immigrants.<sup>43</sup> South Asians

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<sup>37</sup> McMahon, "Chapter 1: Punjab, 1899."

<sup>38</sup> Chalana, "Whither the 'Hindu Invasion'?" South Asians in the Pacific Northwest of the United States, 1907-1930," 8.

<sup>39</sup> "Victims of Works At Stege Are Interred.," "Mohammedan Rites Are Observed at Funeral of Explosion Victims.," "Stege Cap Plant Nearly Wrecked By Awful Explosion."

<sup>40</sup> Tom Panas and Joanne Rubio, "Historical Context Statement Draft" (2018), El Cerrito Historical Society, <https://elcerritohistoricalsociety.org/ecprintfiles/historicalcontext.pdf>, 63.

<sup>41</sup> "The California Gold Rush," n.d., <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/goldrush-california/>; "Building the Transcontinental Railroad," n.d., [https://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/disp\\_textbook.cfm?smtID=2&psid=3147#:~:text=The%20transcontinental%20railroad%20was%20built,drift%20from%20cuts%20to%20fills.](https://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/disp_textbook.cfm?smtID=2&psid=3147#:~:text=The%20transcontinental%20railroad%20was%20built,drift%20from%20cuts%20to%20fills.;); "The Transcontinental Railroad," n.d., <https://www.loc.gov/collections/railroad-maps-1828-to-1900/articles-and-essays/history-of-railroads-and-maps/the-transcontinental-railroad/>.

<sup>42</sup> "Building the Transcontinental Railroad.," "The Transcontinental Railroad."

<sup>43</sup> "Building the Transcontinental Railroad."



first came to the Pacific Northwest, and worked in lumber mills, iron foundries, and helped build the Western Pacific Railroad.<sup>44</sup>

While their initial occupations may have been factory work or expanding transportation, the pull of California was the arable land.<sup>45</sup> A substantial portion of the workers were drawn to agriculture, especially those from Punjab, an incredibly fertile region where the primary occupation was farming. Employers tended to prefer South Asian workers because of their experience.<sup>46</sup> South Asian farmers established themselves first in the Sacramento Valley, and then moved towards the San Joaquin Valley, and then the Imperial Valley.<sup>47</sup>

Groups of farmers were connected to each other through personal social networks, which helped them scout job opportunities and set wage levels.<sup>48</sup> In California, the existing labor unions did not accept South Asian workers in their ranks.<sup>49</sup> Many South Asian workers formed their own ad-hoc organizations to back their interests. They would elect a leader, called “boss”,<sup>50</sup> and administrative positions. The purpose of these organizations was to “look out for new opportunities of employment, to secure and diffuse knowledge of working conditions, wages,

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<sup>44</sup> Suzanne McMahon, “Chapter 3: From Laborers to Landowners,” *Echoes of Freedom: South Asian Pioneers in California, 1899-1965*, 2020, <https://guides.lib.berkeley.edu/echoes-of-freedom/laborers-to-landowners>; “Chapter III: Occupational Classification,” in *Hindustani Workers on the Pacific Coast*, by Rajani Kanta Das (Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1923), 22–28, [https://www.google.com/books/edition/Hindustani\\_Workers\\_on\\_the\\_Pacific\\_Coast/t9shAAAAMAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=inauthor:%22Rajani+Kanta+Das%22&printsec=frontcover](https://www.google.com/books/edition/Hindustani_Workers_on_the_Pacific_Coast/t9shAAAAMAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=inauthor:%22Rajani+Kanta+Das%22&printsec=frontcover).

<sup>45</sup> Chalana, “Whither the ‘Hindu Invasion’? South Asians in the Pacific Northwest of the United States, 1907-1930,” 3, 6.; McMahon, “Chapter 3: From Laborers to Landowners.”

<sup>46</sup> “Chapter VI: Industrial Efficiency,” in *Hindustani Workers on the Pacific Coast*, by Rajani Kanta Das (Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1923), 50–52, [https://www.google.com/books/edition/Hindustani\\_Workers\\_on\\_the\\_Pacific\\_Coast/t9shAAAAMAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=inauthor:%22Rajani+Kanta+Das%22&printsec=frontcover](https://www.google.com/books/edition/Hindustani_Workers_on_the_Pacific_Coast/t9shAAAAMAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=inauthor:%22Rajani+Kanta+Das%22&printsec=frontcover).

<sup>47</sup> “Chapter III: Occupational Classification,” 25-26. ; McMahon, “Chapter 3: From Laborers to Landowners.”

<sup>48</sup> Misrow, “East Indian Immigration on the Pacific Coast,” 22-23.

<sup>49</sup> Misrow, “East Indian Immigration on the Pacific Coast,” 22-23.

<sup>50</sup> Misrow, “East Indian Immigration on the Pacific Coast,” 22-23.

and their probably(sic.) fluctuations”.<sup>51</sup> A notable aspect of these groups is that they were in communication with one another so as to not undercut the common wage-rate. The boss also acted as an interpreter and manager for the group. They also maintained a cooperative dining system with a member designated as a cook.<sup>52</sup> The Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society in Stockton in the Bay Area was also a group that provided care and services to South Asians in need. Other than that, there were few support networks serving South Asians.<sup>53</sup>

South Asians came to the United States in search of economic and educational opportunities. As aforementioned, South Asians were frustrated with their quality of life in British India. Economist John R. Commons explains their motives in *Races and Immigrants in America*: “the populations of that land are growing discontented as they see Indians returned from Natal, where they earned \$20 to \$35 a month, while at home they get only \$3 to \$7 under a penal contract system. The American consul at Calcutta reports ten sturdy Punjab Mohammedans (sic.) inquiring the way to America and telling of their friends at work on American dairy farms... The self-governing British colonies [Canada] have educational restrictions designed to prevent Asiatic immigration, whether of British subjects or aliens; other colonies have contract labor. The unrest of India therefore turns the native eyes towards America”.<sup>54</sup> On top of this, Steamship companies were trying to profit off of those who were fantasizing about opportunities abroad. Capitalists on the West Coast were trying to lure naive

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<sup>51</sup> Misrow, “East Indian Immigration on the Pacific Coast,” 23.

<sup>52</sup> Misrow, “East Indian Immigration on the Pacific Coast,” 23.

<sup>53</sup> “Chapter IX: Social Life,” in *Hindustani Workers on the Pacific Coast*, by Rajani Kanta Das (Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1923), 89,

[https://www.google.com/books/edition/Hindustani\\_Workers\\_on\\_the\\_Pacific\\_Coast/t9shAAAAMAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=inauthor:%22Rajani+Kanta+Das%22&printsec=frontcover.](https://www.google.com/books/edition/Hindustani_Workers_on_the_Pacific_Coast/t9shAAAAMAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=inauthor:%22Rajani+Kanta+Das%22&printsec=frontcover.); “Hindu Immigration Hearings,” 7.

<sup>54</sup> John R. Commons, *Races and Immigrants in America*, 1907, 103-104, [https://www.gutenberg.org/files/34028/34028-h/34028-h.htm#Page\\_107](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/34028/34028-h/34028-h.htm#Page_107).

workers to exploit (pay them wages below the market rate).<sup>55</sup> People were also seeking to further their education, as Mr. Sudhindra Bose points out in his testimony in the *Hindu Immigration Hearings*.<sup>56</sup>

There weren't many women among the early immigrants. Part of this could be attributed to the legacy of lascars making up the first wave of immigrants. Opportunities for women to come on their own volition rarely existed. The process to arrive and settle in the United States was not easily accessible to South Asians, many of whom paid a fortune for the journey. However, there were exceptions. For instance, in 1886, Dr. Anandibai Joshee came to the US to earn a medical degree.<sup>57</sup> The most important reason was that they simply were not allowed to come. Some immigrant men would send for their spouses and children back home once they had reached a point of stability, but the Canadian and US governments did not let those families land.<sup>58</sup> There were exceptions, such as Kartar Dhillon, a political activist and writer. Her father came to California in 1897 (note that this was prior to when official arrivals began, in 1899), and then brought his wife over in 1910. They started a family here thereafter.<sup>59</sup>

Because South Asian women could not come, men were building communities with other racial minorities. Marrying outside of one's designated racial group was controversial. It came up in the 1914 *Hindu Immigration Hearings*. Mr. Sudhindra Bose had favorable opinions on it, but was only referring to marriages between White and South Asian people.<sup>60</sup> In *Hindustani Workers*

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<sup>55</sup> Misrow, "East Indian Immigration on the Pacific Coast", 6.

<sup>56</sup> "Hindu Immigration Hearings", 4.

<sup>57</sup> Sohi, "Introduction", 4.

<sup>58</sup> "Chapter XI: Principal Problems.," 109.

<sup>59</sup> Sohi, "Introduction", 4.; "Kartar Dhillon," Pioneering Punjabis Digital Archive, n.d., <https://pioneeringpunjabis.ucdavis.edu/people/pioneers/kartar-dhillon/>.

<sup>60</sup> "Hindu Immigration Hearings," 11, 15-16.

on the *Pacific Coast*, Das wrote that South Asian men had three options: marrying formerly enslaved African women, Mexican women, or White women. According to him, South Asian men perceived themselves to be higher on the racial totem pole than African people, and would not marry them.<sup>61</sup> This indicates some differences between the workers on the West Coast and workers in the Eastern and Southern US. There were many Muslim Bengali men marrying into existing Black communities.<sup>62</sup> Marrying Mexican women was difficult, because they were more concentrated in Southern California, near Imperial Valley. At that time, Das noted about 30 such marriages.<sup>63</sup> “Canadian or American”<sup>64</sup> (presumably White) women were prejudiced against South Asian men. Still, there were some cases of those marriages taking place.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> “Chapter XI: Principal Problems,” 109-110.

<sup>62</sup> “The largest number [of early twentieth century South Asian maritime workers immigrating to the East Coast] was from villages in East Bengal” Bald, “Jumping Ship,” 12; “It was African American and Caribbean communities in cities such as New York, Baltimore, and Detroit that took in South Asian Muslim migrants at a time when the United States itself sought only to exclude them.” Bald, “Jumping Ship,” 15.; See also: Bald, *Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America*, 1-10.

<sup>63</sup> “Chapter IX: Social Life,” 77.

<sup>64</sup> “Chapter XI: Principal Problems,” 110.

<sup>65</sup> “Chapter IX: Social Life,” 77.; “Chapter XI: Principal Problems,” 110.; Chalana, “Whither the ‘Hindu Invasion’? South Asians in the Pacific Northwest of the United States, 1907-1930,” 9.

## Class Background and Labor Organization

Early South Asian immigrants' economic and "class" background is contestable. During the Second World War, there were about 3000 South Asians residing in the States. Most of them had been living there for decades, working on farms, lumber mills, and factories in California, or in the Northeastern US.<sup>66</sup> In his article "Whither the "Hindu Invasion"? South Asians in the Pacific Northwest of the United States, 1907–1930," Manish Chalana alleges that the immigrants were mostly "peasant stock", but had some means to make the journey west.<sup>67</sup> Many of these immigrants were said to be part of the "unskilled labor class".<sup>68</sup> Bose's testimony in the *Hindu Immigration Hearings* reveals inconsistencies in the conversation around "skilled" or "unskilled labor". He tried to argue that South Asian workers cannot compete with white workers, because they were "unskilled". He clarified the meaning: they could not operate machinery. Apparently farming experience (of Punjabi men) did not count as a skill, despite South Asian immigrants being preferred for farming jobs in California.<sup>69</sup> For cultivating certain crops, such as sugar beets, employers would explicitly seek South Asians.<sup>70</sup>

South Asian Americans at the time alleged that they were an upwardly mobile immigrant group. Many farmers went on to become landowners and businessmen.<sup>71</sup> For instance, Mr. Sudhindra Bose was a lecturer at the State university of Iowa, originally from Kolkata, shared his

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<sup>66</sup> Bald, *Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America*, 4.

<sup>67</sup> Chalana, "Whither the 'Hindu Invasion'? South Asians in the Pacific Northwest of the United States, 1907-1930," 5.

<sup>68</sup> "Hindu Immigration Hearings," 4-5.; "White Workmen Protest Against Hindu Toilers.;"

<sup>69</sup> "Chapter VI: Industrial Efficiency," 51.

<sup>70</sup> "Help Wanted: Male and Female," *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 16, 1918, NewsBank, [https://www.google.com/url?q=https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p%3DWORLDNEWS%26docref%3Dimage/v2%253A142051F45F422A02%2540WHNPX-14ECBE1DA5200D32%25402421700-14EA608B213A666A%254013-14EA608B213A666A%2540.&sa=D&source=editors&ust=1712020105854411&usg=AOvVaw2EGRW2I9gmbhsK1y3\\_Aga1](https://www.google.com/url?q=https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p%3DWORLDNEWS%26docref%3Dimage/v2%253A142051F45F422A02%2540WHNPX-14ECBE1DA5200D32%25402421700-14EA608B213A666A%254013-14EA608B213A666A%2540.&sa=D&source=editors&ust=1712020105854411&usg=AOvVaw2EGRW2I9gmbhsK1y3_Aga1).

<sup>71</sup> McMahon, "Chapter 3: From Laborers to Landowners."

story at the Hearings. He arrived in the United States and became a farm-hand, but quickly accrued degrees, and eventually, reached his current station as an academic at age 30.<sup>72</sup>

Many South Asian immigrants were literate and had esteemable credentials.<sup>73</sup> As Vivek Bald discusses in the introduction to *Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America*, the immigrants Mubarek Ali Khan and JJ Singh plead a case to the US government to allow immigrants from the subcontinent to naturalize. Both men “presented lists and biographies of these scientists, engineers, and scholars”<sup>74</sup> as examples of “leading”<sup>75</sup> South Asian immigrants.

There are inconsistencies within this narrative. South Asian immigrants’ economic positions were fluctuating. There are plenty of examples of this. Many farmers owned land in the subcontinent, and would mortgage their homesteads to make a trip to the Americas.<sup>76</sup> The very first official arrival of a South Asian immigrant in 1899, Mr. Bakshis Singh, was initially a salesman, but went on to become a “laborer”.<sup>77</sup> Mr. Bose claimed to be from a “middle-class”<sup>78</sup> background, and had some higher education, but worked as a farm-hand when he arrived.<sup>79</sup> The men originally part of the British Empire’s police force who tried to settle in North America likely worked as laborers.<sup>80</sup> In Stege, employees of the Metropolitan Match Factory Said Ali and

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<sup>72</sup> “Hindu Immigration Hearings,” 5.

<sup>73</sup> “Hindu Immigration Hearings,” 5-6., “Chapter IX: Social Life.” 77-78.

<sup>74</sup> Bald, *Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America*, 3.

<sup>75</sup> Bald, *Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America*, 3.

<sup>76</sup> Misrow, “East Indian Immigration on the Pacific Coast,” 6.

<sup>77</sup> “Chapter I: Immigration,” 10.

<sup>78</sup> “Hindu Immigration Hearings,” 5.

<sup>79</sup> “Hindu Immigration Hearings,” 5.

<sup>80</sup> “Chapter III: Occupational Classification,” 22; Misrow, “East Indian Immigration on the Pacific Coast,” 2.

his roommate were both originally policemen from Hong Kong.<sup>81</sup> It is difficult to make definitive claims about their position.

The narrative of South Asian upward mobility and prestige arose out of South Asians constantly advocating for expanding their rights in the US. They were reacting to the talking points presented by US Americans in both working and elite positions. They had layers of complaints against South Asians. Proceedings of labor unions, government activities, scholarly work, and newspapers display the dominant white American view of South Asians immigrating into the United States. US American institutions did not want to put resources towards helping South Asians. There were significant concerns among white labor unions about wages being undercut - which was not uniquely applied to South Asians. White Americans were worried about South Asians using State services such as psychiatric hospitals, thus becoming “public charges”<sup>82</sup>. Furthermore, there were deeper hostilities towards South Asian culture and caste hierarchy.

White labor unions did not want South Asians working in the US, because they were worried about wages being undercut. This is a recurring source of apprehension brought up in the proceedings of the Asiatic Exclusion League, trade union documents, and the reporting on various public demonstrations against South Asian workers. In 1912, proceedings of the

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<sup>81</sup> “All Murder Charges Are Sworn To,” *Richmond Daily Independent*, ca 1913, Richmond Museum of History and Culture, Richmond, CA.; “Witnesses Found Who Saw Meeting of Rosa Domingo with Sweatheart (Sic.),” *Richmond Daily Independent*, October 8, 1913, Richmond Museum of History and Culture, Richmond, CA.; “Hindu Gives Detailed Story of How He Killed Rosa Domingo at Stege.”

<sup>82</sup> “Hindu Immigration Hearings,” 6.; Sohi, “Introduction,” 5.; Misrow, “East Indian Immigration on the Pacific Coast,” 32.

American Federation of Labor's Annual Convention revealed that an explicit goal of their union was to limit "Oriental"<sup>83</sup> immigration with "stringent regulations".<sup>84</sup>

The Asiatic Exclusion League was formed in 1905 in San Francisco. The leader was general secretary of the Building Trades Council.<sup>85</sup> In a letter to the Secretary of Commerce and Labor, they wrote that they "respectfully protests(sic.) against the wholesale landing of large numbers of Hindus".<sup>86</sup> They questioned whether South Asians were coming to the United States to "acquire homes and "participate in the institutions that have been builded(sic.) here by citizens of the white race".<sup>87</sup> They tried to illustrate ways that South Asians were trying "to lower and degrade the condition of the unfortunate white laborer".<sup>88</sup> They made arguments against the practice of sending remittances, because it left them "destitute"<sup>89</sup> and turned them into public charges. An enduring fear was of wages being undercut.<sup>90</sup> They focused on California, because it had a similar climate to the Indian subcontinent, and would presumably get a huge population influx.<sup>91</sup> The League encouraged lawmakers to prevent South Asians from arriving. Newspapers were sympathetic to their cause: it was not controversial,<sup>92</sup> "as many white workers who demanded more wages were losing employment".<sup>93</sup> The rhetoric of white labor unions was

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<sup>83</sup> "Report of Proceedings of the Thirty-Second Annual Convention of the American Federation of Labor 32 1912.," in *HathiTrust* (Rochester, New York: The Law Reporter Printing Company, 1912), 217, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/wu.89062163407?urlappend=%3Bseq=5>.

<sup>84</sup> "Report of Proceedings of the Thirty-Second Annual Convention of the American Federation of Labor 32 1912.," 217.

<sup>85</sup> "Asiatic Coolie Invasion - 1906," accessed April 5, 2024, <https://sfmuseum.org/1906.2/invasion.html>.

<sup>86</sup> *Proceedings of the Asiatic Exclusion League 1908-1912*, 342.

<sup>87</sup> *Proceedings of the Asiatic Exclusion League 1908-1912*, 345.

<sup>88</sup> *Proceedings of the Asiatic Exclusion League 1908-1912*, 347.

<sup>89</sup> *Proceedings of the Asiatic Exclusion League 1908-1912*, 345.

<sup>90</sup> *Proceedings of the Asiatic Exclusion League 1908-1912*, 345.

<sup>91</sup> *Proceedings of the Asiatic Exclusion League 1908-1912*, 370.

<sup>92</sup> Gallagher, "1907 Bellingham Mob Forced East Indian Mill Workers out of Town."; Cahn, "The 1907 Bellingham Riots in Historical Context."; "White Workmen Protest Against Hindu Toilers."

<sup>93</sup> Chalana, "Whither the 'Hindu Invasion'? South Asians in the Pacific Northwest of the United States, 1907-1930," 7.



responsible for the infamous Bellingham Race Riots in 1907, and the Stege “riots”, and other such demonstrations across the West Coast.<sup>94</sup>

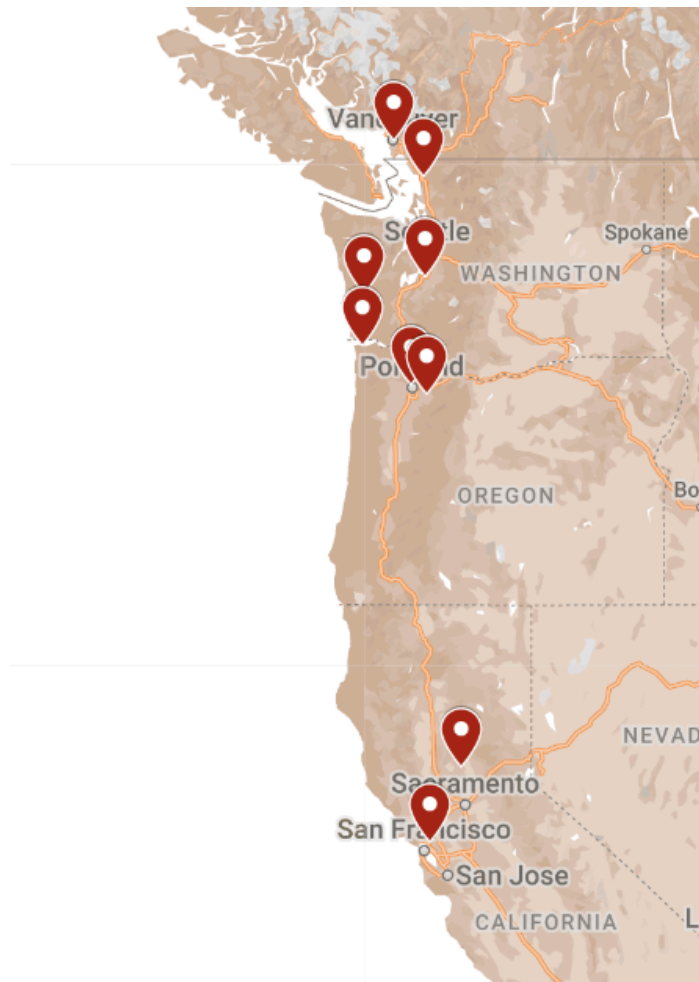


Figure 3. Map of anti-South Asian demonstrations in early twentieth century, data from “Chapter XI: Principal Problems,” 111-112; Chalana, “Whither the ‘Hindu Invasion’? South Asians in the Pacific Northwest of the United States, 1907-1930.,” 2; Misrow, “East Indian Immigration on the Pacific Coast.,” 31.

The argument made by the lawyers against Bhagat Singh Thind’s naturalization was that whiteness was to be “interpreted in accordance with the understanding of the common man”.<sup>95</sup>

<sup>94</sup> Englesberg, “The Bellingham ‘Anti-Hindu’ Riot,” 28-35.; Gallagher, “1907 Bellingham Mob Forced East Indian Mill Workers out of Town.”; Cahn, “The 1907 Bellingham Riots in Historical Context.”; “White Workmen Protest Against Hindu Toilers.”

<sup>95</sup> “Hindus Too Brunette To Vote Here,” *The Literary Digest*, March 10, 1923, South Asian American Digital Archive, <https://www.saada.org/item/20101210-148>.

The fact that lawyers used this statement as a winning argument in a court proceeding displays the dominance of white people in the US' imaginary. After this case, there was much public discourse about South Asians in the United States.

White Americans made assertions about South Asian traits in contrast with other Asian people, and used these judgements to justify excluding them in certain places, and including them in others. Notwithstanding, it restricted the movement of all minoritized groups in the US. For instance, the American consul at Calcutta had judged South Asian men being “stronger and more intelligent than the Chinese coolies (sic.) and preferable for work on the Panama Canal.”<sup>96</sup> Nevertheless, South Asians “were as incapable of assimilation as other Asiatics”.<sup>97</sup> In November 1913, the opinion piece titled “The Hindoo Question” was published in the Richmond Daily Independent. The author stated that South Asians were the most “objectionable”<sup>98</sup> racial group among “Oriental races”.<sup>99</sup> They wanted to prevent their coming to avoid “actual physical racial conflicts”.<sup>100</sup> Mr. Bose also expressed that “a high Government official, a gentleman for whom I have great respect, and he stated to me that the Hindus of all people are most undesirable”.<sup>101</sup>

White authors of magazine and newspaper articles also evaluated the racial standing of South Asian immigrants on the basis of their caste, especially surrounding the landmark naturalization case *Thind V. USA*.<sup>102</sup> “No Hindu can be Naturalized”, was an opinion piece

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<sup>96</sup> Commons, *Races and Immigrants in America*, 103-4.

<sup>97</sup> *Proceedings of the Asiatic Exclusion League 1908-1912*, 347.

<sup>98</sup> “The Hindoo Question.”

<sup>99</sup> “The Hindoo Question.”

<sup>100</sup> “The Hindoo Question.”

<sup>101</sup> “Hindu Immigration Hearings.” 4.

<sup>102</sup> “1923 Thind v. US.”; Deslippe, “Bhagat Singh Thind in Jail.”; Agnes Foster Buchanan, “The West and the Hindu Invasion,” *Overland Monthly*, April 1908, University of Washington University Library Special Collections.; “No Hindu Can Be Naturalized,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, February 21, 1923, NewsBank, [https://infoweb-newsbank-com.libproxy.berkeley.edu/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&t=pubname%](https://infoweb-newsbank-com.libproxy.berkeley.edu/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&t=pubname%2F)

published in the San Francisco Chronicle. The author expressed that caste hierarchies among South Asians made them a problematic group - that caste-oppressed South Asians were “degraded”<sup>103</sup>, and that caste-privileged South Asians brought in “domestic feuds”<sup>104</sup>.

South Asians were trying to defend their interests in a place that was incredibly divided on racial lines. They identified the hierarchy and sought to place themselves favorably within it, whatever made them seem unthreatening. In 1914, Mr. Bose claimed that South Asian workers were not “skilled” because he wanted to assuage union concerns of South Asians undercutting wages.<sup>105</sup> Advocates for South Asian naturalization in 1944 emphasized “the accomplishments of “leading” Indian Americans of the day... [they] stressed the participation of Indian forces and Indian men in the war effort and touted the benefits of expanded US trade with an India that would likely gain its independence at the war’s end”. The argument for allowing South Asians to naturalize was centered on which classes would be able to contribute to the US’ prestige, and pseudoracial claims about the sameness of South Asian dominant castes with white people. As evidenced by their testimonies, they were making an argument that South Asians were valuable to the United States because of their capacity to further US economic and imperial interests. This ignored what most immigrants were actually doing. Community organizer Ibrahim Choudry drew the Committee’s attention to the “many... workers and farmers... [who contributed] in all sections of American industry”.<sup>106</sup>

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[3A142051F45F422A02%21San%2BFrancisco%2BChronicle&sort=YMD\\_date%3AD&fld-base-0=alltext&maxresults=20&val-base-0=%22We%20want%20no%20immigrants%20which%20recognize%20caste%22&pedirect=true&docref=image/v2%3A142051F45F422A02%40WHNPX-14EFB60F0BAC345B%402423472-14EC5D318D5E9FDE%4027-14EC5D318D5E9FDE%40](https://www.sanfranciscochronicle.com/3A142051F45F422A02%21San%2BFrancisco%2BChronicle&sort=YMD_date%3AD&fld-base-0=alltext&maxresults=20&val-base-0=%22We%20want%20no%20immigrants%20which%20recognize%20caste%22&pedirect=true&docref=image/v2%3A142051F45F422A02%40WHNPX-14EFB60F0BAC345B%402423472-14EC5D318D5E9FDE%4027-14EC5D318D5E9FDE%40).

<sup>103</sup> “No Hindu Can Be Naturalized.”

<sup>104</sup> “No Hindu Can Be Naturalized.”

<sup>105</sup> “Hindu Immigration Hearings,” 4.

<sup>106</sup> Bald, *Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America*, 3-4.

All of these narratives are biased towards those who arrived through official, legal means. There were immigrants who were not coming through the official points of entry - such as Angel Island, San Francisco. Kartar Dhillon's father had arrived in 1897, two years before the first "official" arrival. There were 2000 South Asians recorded in the US at the turn of the twentieth century, but this number was 4 times the number of recorded arrivals.<sup>107</sup> This scenario has persisted, which contradicts the narrative of the "educated elite" group of people, cherry-picked through the Hart-Celler Act.<sup>108</sup> South Asians are not a monolith, and have diverse experiences. Case in point, they currently make up the third largest group of undocumented people in the United States (The Hindu, 2023). Their stories aren't spotlighted, but they do exist.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Chalana, "Whither the 'Hindu Invasion'? South Asians in the Pacific Northwest of the United States, 1907-1930," 4.

<sup>108</sup> Bald, *Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America*, 5.

<sup>109</sup> "Saket Soni on Forced Immigrant Labor Used to Clean Up Climate Disasters in U.S.," Democracy Now!, accessed April 5, 2024, [https://www.democracynow.org/2023/9/4/the\\_great\\_escape\\_saket\\_soni](https://www.democracynow.org/2023/9/4/the_great_escape_saket_soni).

## History of Stege

The region now known as Richmond was originally inhabited by the Lisjan people.<sup>110</sup> They were hunter-gatherers, eating a mainly acorn-based diet.<sup>111</sup> They carefully managed the local ecology, and practiced sustainable land cultivation techniques such as landscape burning.<sup>112</sup> Europeans started violently taking land in the Americas starting in the fifteenth century. Spain colonized present-day Mexico and Baja California in the sixteenth century, following a “three-year bloodbath”.<sup>113</sup> Two hundred years later, they tried to claim the land of Alta California (present-day US) by building Presidios (military forts) and Catholic missions.

The Catholic missions changed the way that land was used. The hunter-gatherer society shifted to an agrarian society. The aim of the missions was to force Native American people to sustain Catholic, Spanish interests. The land was cultivated extractively through the slave labor of indigenous people, who were brutally kept in check at the hands of the mission.<sup>114</sup> They worked numerous roles, including brickmaking, construction, cattle rearing, and blacksmithing.<sup>115</sup> Every single mission was resisted by Indigenous people, which led to their continuing existence in California.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> “Lisjan Territory and History,” n.d., <https://sogoreate-landtrust.org/lisjan-history-and-territory/>.

<sup>111</sup> “Ohlones and Coast Miwoks (U.S. National Park Service).”; “The First Peoples of California,” Collection: California as I Saw It: First-Person Narratives of California’s Early Years, 1849 to 1900, n.d., <https://www.loc.gov/collections/california-first-person-narratives/articles-and-essays/early-california-history/spanish-california/>.

<sup>112</sup> “Native Peoples of the East Bay: Past to Present” (East Bay Regional Parks District, 2020), 2.

<sup>113</sup> “Culture of Conquest,” in *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States*, by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, ReVisioning American History (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014), 43.

<sup>114</sup> “Lisjan Territory and History.”

<sup>115</sup> “The Missions,” Collection: California as I Saw It: First-Person Narratives of California’s Early Years, 1849 to 1900, n.d., <https://www.loc.gov/collections/california-first-person-narratives/articles-and-essays/early-california-history/mission-s/>.

<sup>116</sup> “Sea to Shining Sea,” in *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States*, by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, ReVisioning American History (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014), 129.

Regions currently known as Northern California were difficult to get to by sea and surrounding regions were not colonized. Juan Bautista de Anza was tasked with finding a land route in the eighteenth century. He used existing Native American routes as well as help from Native American people to record a path from Baja California to Alta California. He brought several families to settle with him, incentivized by promises of land ownership, riches, and other material goods. About 300 people and a 1000 animals came. They wreaked havoc to the ecosystem along the trail, disrupting water and food systems used by the indigenous people there. In 1776, they set up current San Francisco and surrounding areas to be under the jurisdiction of Mission Dolores and Presidio (military base).<sup>117</sup> The Presidio existed for two reasons: “to protect the mission from Indigenous inhabitants whose territory the Spanish were usurping and to round up those same people and force them to live and work for the Franciscan friars at the mission”.<sup>118</sup>

Mexico won independence from Spain in 1821. The government restructured the Missions, “secularizing (privatizing)”<sup>119</sup> them. On paper, they intended to hand over the Missions to the native workers, but most native workers remained de facto enslaved.<sup>120</sup> Mexico granted land to US Americans and opened itself up to trade with them. US American entrepreneurs planned to monopolize the fur trade in Northern Mexico to gain further entry into the territory, scheming to eventually annex it. US government operatives extensively surveyed the land in preparation of conquest. A couple of decades after they started laying the groundwork for it, the

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<sup>117</sup> Panas and Rubio, “Historical Context Statement Draft,” 8, 10, 14, 16-17, 22.

<sup>118</sup> “Sea to Shining Sea,” 127.

<sup>119</sup> “Native Peoples of the East Bay: Past to Present,” 6.

<sup>120</sup> “Native Peoples of the East Bay: Past to Present,” 6.

US declared war on Mexico. It ended in 1847, with the United States winning. The US State of California was annexed in 1850.<sup>121</sup>

Among the settlers who came with Anza were the Castro family. Their two-year old son, Francisco, grew up to become a Spanish soldier. Within his capacity as a soldier, he was made Majordomo (chief steward of the household) of Mission Dolores. He also governed San Jose as Alcade (mayor and justice of the peace).<sup>122</sup> He was granted 17000 acres of pasture and agricultural land in present-day Western Contra Costa County, called Rancho San Pablo. When he died, his land was split as an undivided interest halfway between his wife and his eleven children. This meant that each section of land had 1/22 claim by Francisco's children and 1/2 claim by his widow. The children wanted more, so in 1852, they took the matter to the courts. Legal proceedings went on over a period of 42 years. Due to land speculator greed and the drawn-out court proceedings, this land was bought and sold several times before the case was settled. The designated boundaries were unclear until 1894, when the case Emeric vs. Alvarado was finally resolved.<sup>123</sup>

In 1849, right before California was officially annexed, gold was mined at Sutter's Mill in Northern California. People from all over the country, and internationally, were drawn to California because they wanted to make quick money. They were known as the 49ers. This was a major event that drastically changed the economic and demographic patterns of California. About a hundred thousand people came, at least one of whom was a South Asian man,<sup>124</sup> who

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<sup>121</sup>“Sea to Shining Sea,” 121-124.; Panas and Rubio, “Historical Context Statement Draft.,” 25.

<sup>122</sup> Panas and Rubio, “Historical Context Statement Draft.,” 17, 31.

<sup>123</sup> Panas and Rubio, “Historical Context Statement Draft.,” 17, 23, 32, 33, 53.

<sup>124</sup> Chatterjee and Ghosh, “Immigration, Immigrants, and Visitors (in Progress).”

“exterminated more than one hundred thousand California Native people in twenty-five years, reducing the population to thirty thousand by 1870”.<sup>125</sup> Many Native American refugees were transported to Oregon and Oklahoma reservations.<sup>126</sup> In this crazed, violent environment, settler businesses popped up as people who were able to spend money poured in. Manufacturing expanded.<sup>127</sup> The transportation industry expanded as more people came in. All of this created the impetus for the transcontinental railroad to be built.<sup>128</sup>

Among the 49ers was a fourteen year old German boy named Richard Stege. He spent the next few years traveling across the West Coast, in search of gold. Eventually, he settled down, and became a businessman in Oakland. He led a few ventures through which he made a small fortune, including but not limited to, a restaurant and a siberian rug shop. In 1868, he bought 600 acres of the Western part of the San Pablo Rancho, in what is now called Richmond. He married the widowed Mrs. Quilfelt, the previous caretaker of the ranch. He built his family estate there. It was an organized US settlement in Western Contra Costa County well before El Cerrito or Richmond.<sup>129</sup> It soon became a tourist attraction. They sold frogs from their ponds to elite restaurants and tended to lavish rose gardens.<sup>130</sup> He also decided to sell chunks of his land.<sup>131</sup> Within a decade of owning the land, the Southern section of land was leased to heavy industry enterprises.

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<sup>125</sup> “Sea to Shining Sea,” 129.

<sup>126</sup> “Sea to Shining Sea,” 130.

<sup>127</sup> “Historical Impact of the California Gold Rush | Norwich University - Online,” accessed May 9, 2024, <https://online.norwich.edu/online/about/resource-library/historical-impact-california-gold-rush>.

<sup>128</sup> “The Transcontinental Railroad.”

<sup>129</sup> Panas and Rubio, “Historical Context Statement Draft,” 42-43 .

<sup>130</sup> “Richard Stege Bio,” n.d., Richmond Museum of History and Culture, Richmond, CA, accessed January 13, 2024.; Ethel Kerns, “Miss Edith Stege,” n.d., Richmond Museum of History and Culture, Richmond, CA, accessed January 13, 2024.; Panas and Rubio, “Historical Context Statement Draft,” 43.; “Two Pioneers,” n.d., Richmond Museum of History and Culture, Richmond, CA, accessed January 13, 2024.; Lee Fridell, *The Story of Richmond*, 45, 1954.

<sup>131</sup> “Richard Stege Bio.”



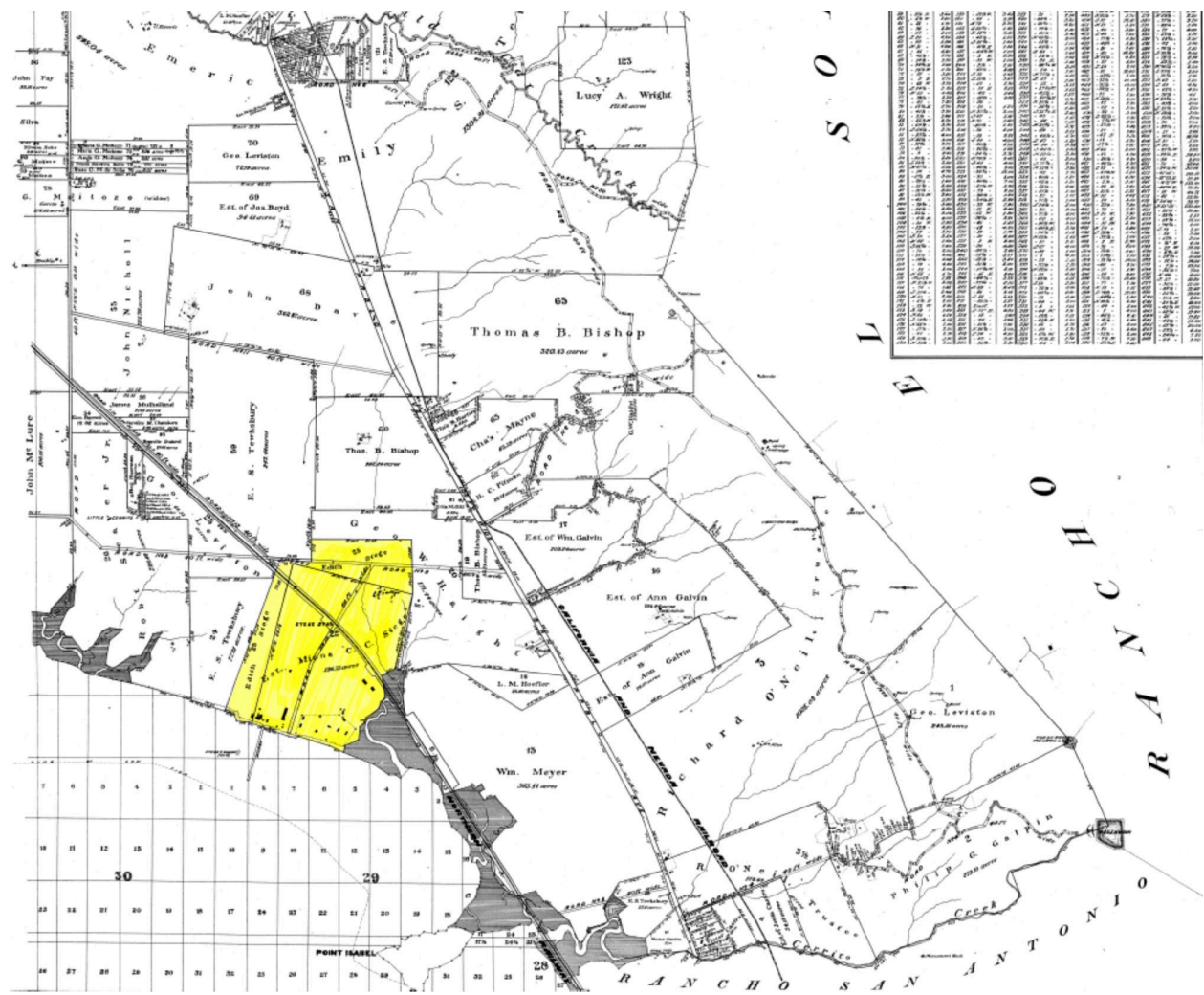


Figure 4. Map of San Pablo Ranch, with Stege highlighted, from Panas and Rubio, “Historical Context Statement Draft,” 54.



Figure 5. 1903 Map of Stege, from Panas and Rubio, “Historical Context Statement Draft,” 44.

People started mining in Contra Costa County in 1850.<sup>132</sup> “For many years, coal-mining was the principal interest of the county”.<sup>133</sup> In 1863, copper was discovered, and people started buying and selling land, starting enterprises.<sup>134</sup> Stege was ideal for industrialization because of its proximity to rail transportation and the waterfront.<sup>135</sup> Central Pacific built a railroad in Contra Costa County in 1877.<sup>136</sup> The railroad made Stege a natural site from where freight transportation

<sup>132</sup> *History of Contra Costa County, California; with Biographical Sketches of the Leading Men and Women of the County Who Have Been Identified with Its Growth and Development from the Early Days to the Present* (Historic Record Company, Inc., 1926), 99, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.c098819167&seq=9>.

<sup>133</sup> *History of Contra Costa County, California; with Biographical Sketches of the Leading Men and Women of the County Who Have Been Identified with Its Growth and Development from the Early Days to the Present*, 100.

<sup>134</sup> *History of Contra Costa County, California; with Biographical Sketches of the Leading Men and Women of the County Who Have Been Identified with Its Growth and Development from the Early Days to the Present*, 100.

<sup>135</sup> Panas and Rubio, “Historical Context Statement Draft.,” 42–43, 63.

<sup>136</sup> *History of Contra Costa County, California; with Biographical Sketches of the Leading Men and Women of the County Who Have Been Identified with Its Growth and Development from the Early Days to the Present*, 97.

could be carried out. That very year, Stege Tonite Powder Works, Western Chemical Company, and California Cap Company set up factories in Stege.<sup>137</sup> The population of the county grew immensely after this, because rail was the fastest mode of freight transportation at the time.<sup>138</sup> For any type of manufacturing enterprise at the time, freight transportation was an expensive and burdensome undertaking.<sup>139</sup> Before his death, Richard Stege was contracted to transport powder (explosives) from California Cap Co. to the rail station near the present day Booker T. Anderson Jr. Park.<sup>140</sup> Other factories that were set up there included the Metropolitan Match Company, California Cartridge Company, and the US Briquette Company.



Figure 6. Industrial Map of Stege in 1918, from the El Cerrito Historical Society, courtesy of Richmond Public Library History Room.

<sup>137</sup> Richards, "YESTERDAYS In Richmond, Contra Costa County, and California.," Dec 1965.

<sup>138</sup> *History of Contra Costa County, California; with Biographical Sketches of the Leading Men and Women of the County Who Have Been Identified with Its Growth and Development from the Early Days to the Present*, 97.

<sup>139</sup> *History of Contra Costa County, California; with Biographical Sketches of the Leading Men and Women of the County Who Have Been Identified with Its Growth and Development from the Early Days to the Present*, 97.; Panas and Rubio, "Historical Context Statement Draft," 63.

<sup>140</sup> "Richard Stege Bio.," "Two Pioneers.," Staniford, *El Cerrito Historical Evolution*, 26.; Susan D. Cole, *Richmond-Windows to the Past*, 1980, 29.

The California Cap Company had about 120 employees and was valued at 700,000 dollars in 1926.<sup>141</sup> It sat on 160 acres of land and made explosives called blasting caps.<sup>142</sup> Previously, blasting caps were imported from Germany, which made it really difficult to obtain on the West Coast. That is why William Letts Oliver and Freeborn J. Fletter set up the California Cap Company.<sup>143</sup> Oliver had heavily invested in the mining industry.<sup>144</sup> He also previously had a factory in Chile that manufactured guncotton, which resulted in the Chilean government stopping his operations.<sup>145</sup> During the First World War, it was especially busy, supplying explosives and cartridges for the war.<sup>146</sup>

The West Coasts' matchmaking industry extended to different continents and employed people from all over the world, notably Chinese workers.<sup>147</sup> During the late nineteenth century, individuals used an average of 12 matches a day.<sup>148</sup> The Metropolitan Match Factory was one of the largest establishments,<sup>149</sup> and sold matches around the West Coast.<sup>150</sup> It made sulfur matches

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<sup>141</sup> *History of Contra Costa County, California; with Biographical Sketches of the Leading Men and Women of the County Who Have Been Identified with Its Growth and Development from the Early Days to the Present*, 101.

<sup>142</sup> Helen Follett Richards, "YESTERDAYS In Richmond, Contra Costa County, and California," *The Independent* (Richmond California), December 1965, El Cerrito Historical Society.; Hugo Schlatter and Arthur Pine Van Gelder, "History of the Explosives Industry in America," HathiTrust, 1927, 756-758, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015010473992?urlappend=%3Bseq=15>.

<sup>143</sup> Schlatter and Van Gelder, "History of the Explosives Industry in America.," 756-758.; "Blasting Items," February 26, 2019, <http://www.halslamppost.com/Blasting%20Items/slides/California%20Cap%20100%20x%206%20III.html>.

<sup>144</sup> "Oliver's Estate Is Appraised at \$636,631," *Oakland Tribune*, June 11, 1919, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com/article/oakland-tribune-william-letts-oliver-est/111497171/>.

<sup>145</sup> Schlatter and Van Gelder, "History of the Explosives Industry in America." 758.

<sup>146</sup> F. J. Hulaniski, ed., *The History of Contra Costa County California* (The Elms Publishing Co., Inc., 1917), 337, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/yale.39002007940274?urlappend=%3Bseq=11>.

<sup>147</sup> John S. Hittell, *The Commerce and Industries of the Pacific Coast of North America* (San Francisco: A.L. Bancroft and Co., Publishers, 1882), 711-712, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.31822031030737?urlappend=%3Bseq=780>.

<sup>148</sup> Hittell, *The Commerce and Industries of the Pacific Coast of North America*, 712.

<sup>149</sup> Hittell, *The Commerce and Industries of the Pacific Coast of North America*, 712.

<sup>150</sup> Hulaniski, ed., *The History of Contra Costa County California*, 337.

sold glued together in 5-gallon cans.<sup>151</sup> Edward C. Hoffman, a German immigrant, was its superintendent for several decades.<sup>152</sup>

The town incorporated and was named Stege in 1905, and was annexed by Richmond in 1912.<sup>153</sup> In the rest of Richmond, huge industrial changes were taking place. The Richmond Refinery started construction in the West of Richmond in 1900 by the Pacific Coast Oil Company. It was bought by Standard Oil and supervised by long-time employee Richard Rheem.<sup>154</sup> It was the largest refinery in the West Coast when it opened in 1902.<sup>155</sup> At this time, Richmond only had a couple hundred residents.<sup>156</sup> Richmond's population growth mirrored employment patterns at the refinery, increasing tenfold.<sup>157</sup> The Santa Fe railroad's arrival also stimulated economic activity in the Richmond-Stege-El Cerrito area.<sup>158</sup> Richmond's manufacturing output earned it the name "the Pittsburg of the West."<sup>159</sup> In 1926, it had 20 auxiliary plants, nearly 3000 employees, and worth 60 million dollars.<sup>160</sup> Case in point, Edith Stege, the adopted daughter of Richard Stege, had to sell the family estate to Standard Oil

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<sup>151</sup> Mervin Belfils, "Historical Narratives - The Community's Past - 1," El Cerrito Historical Society - History of El Cerrito California, Contra Costa County, October 1975, [https://www.elcerritohistoricalsociety.org/nar\\_community1.html](https://www.elcerritohistoricalsociety.org/nar_community1.html).

<sup>152</sup> Hulaniski, ed., *The History of Contra Costa County California*, 459.

<sup>153</sup> Lisa Owens-Viani, "A Cultural and Natural History of the Baxter Creek Watershed," June 2018, 4-5, <https://thewatershedproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Final-Text.pdf>.

<sup>154</sup> "Formative Years in the Far West; a History of Standard Oil Company of California and Predecessors through 1919," HathiTrust, accessed April 8, 2024, 244, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015001141616?urlappend=%3Bseq=9>; "Chevron Richmond Refinery - History Timeline the Early Years 1902-1914."

<sup>155</sup> Chevron Policy Affairs Government and Public, "History," chevron.com, accessed May 9, 2024, <https://richmond.chevron.com/about/history>.

<sup>156</sup> "Chevron Richmond Refinery - History Timeline the Early Years 1902-1914."

<sup>157</sup> "Chevron Richmond Refinery - History Timeline the Early Years 1902-1914."

<sup>158</sup> *History of Contra Costa County, California; with Biographical Sketches of the Leading Men and Women of the County Who Have Been Identified with Its Growth and Development from the Early Days to the Present*, 132-133; Panas and Rubio, "Historical Context Statement Draft.," 42.

<sup>159</sup> Hulaniski, ed., *The History of Contra Costa County California*, xi.

<sup>160</sup> *History of Contra Costa County, California; with Biographical Sketches of the Leading Men and Women of the County Who Have Been Identified with Its Growth and Development from the Early Days to the Present*, 101.

because she could not afford it. She moved into the Denver Hotel.<sup>161</sup> Towards the end of her life, in the 1930s, she became a matron (female supervisor) for the Standard Oil Refinery.<sup>162</sup>

Richmond changed a lot during the Second World War. Defense contractor Henry Kaiser put 4 shipyards there, and mobilized existing industrial space to participate in the War. Its population quadrupled as people rushed in to find work there. Kaiser expanded his business to healthcare for workers, creating Kaiser Permanente.<sup>163</sup> California Cap Company operated until 1948. The University of California bought the land in 1950.<sup>164</sup> The chemicals processed here made these places dangerous to live in. Standard Oil (now Chevron) continues to pollute Richmond.

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<sup>161</sup> Kerns, "Miss Edith Stege."

<sup>162</sup> Kerns, "Miss Edith Stege."

<sup>163</sup> "National Historical Park - Richmond General Plan 2030," 4-6.

<sup>164</sup> "Fact Sheet | Richmond Field Station Environmental," accessed April 6, 2024, <https://rfs-env.berkeley.edu/remediation/fact-sheet>.

## South Asian Workers at Stege

Stege (now Richmond), California, was a particular hub of South Asian immigration and labor in the early twentieth century. Many of them arrived in 1907, some after being expelled from the Pacific Northwest.<sup>165</sup> About 80 South Asians in Stege worked in the California Cap Company or the Metropolitan Match Factory. They initially lived near the Mira Vista Golf Course (now Berkeley Country Club) above Arlington Avenue and subsequently in bunkhouses next to the factories in Stege proper.<sup>166</sup> There are few records of this population. Former resident Louis Navellier, born in 1900,<sup>167</sup> recalls them “climbing up the hill in a long line coming back from work with turbans wrapped around their heads. He says the children in the neighborhood would run away when they saw this group coming as they were afraid of them”.<sup>168</sup> Census takers approximately only recorded 15% of South Asians overall, because they tended to live in “marginal environments” and often did not speak English.<sup>169</sup> Some were transient, so they may not have been there long enough to be counted in the census. A few of the South Asian workers at Stege appear in the census, and some appear in newspapers, or other historical narratives.

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<sup>165</sup> “White Workmen Protest Against Hindu Toilers.”

<sup>166</sup> Belfils, “Historical Narratives - The Community’s Past - 1.”; Joanne Rubio, “Factories - Stege, CA,” 2024.; Rubio, “Non-White Pop (El Cerrito).”; Rubio, “Hindus in El Cerrito - Stege, Richmond.”; Rubio, “Re: Asian Population - El Cerrito - Project - Hindus,” 2024.

<sup>167</sup> “Louis Navellier - Ancestry.Com,” accessed April 8, 2024, [https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/search/categories/34/?name=Louis\\_Navellier&birth=1900\\_contra+costa-california-usa\\_726&birth\\_x=10-0-0&gender=m](https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/search/categories/34/?name=Louis_Navellier&birth=1900_contra+costa-california-usa_726&birth_x=10-0-0&gender=m).

<sup>168</sup> Belfils, “Historical Narratives - The Community’s Past - 1.”

<sup>169</sup> Chalana, “Whither the ‘Hindu Invasion’? South Asians in the Pacific Northwest of the United States, 1907-1930,” 23.

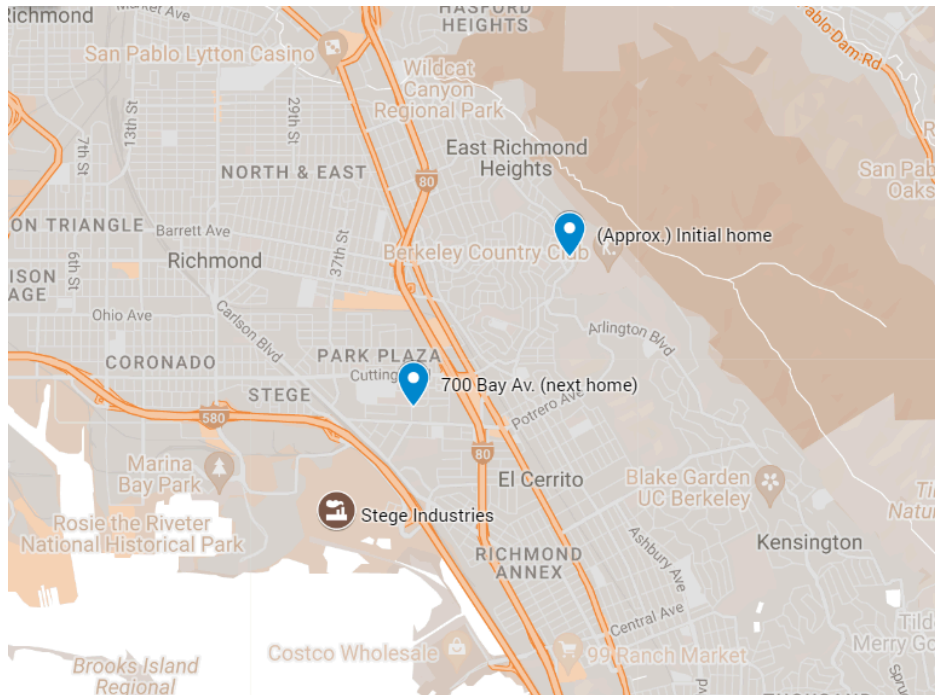


Figure 7. South Asian residential and employment centers in Stege on 2024 map<sup>170</sup>

It was difficult to find South Asians in records because their racial classification was ambiguous. The workers were identified as people born in India who were employed in California Cap Company and Match Factory. Some of the people called “Hindu” weren’t from British India, but from nearby countries. For instance, during a gruesome case of California Cap Co. employees Said Afid and Tetza Mohammed (sic.) passing away in an accident, it was revealed they were from Afghanistan but were “Hindu”.<sup>171</sup> Among the census records, there are 4 South Asian workers at California Cap Co. or the Metropolitan Match Factory counted in 1910: Ramtulla, Abdola Ramtulla, Tolak Singh, and Shahbdin Singh. Shahbdin Singh(20) and Tolak Singh(23) lived on Bay Avenue. Tolak immigrated in 1907, and Shahbdin in 1908. They worked at the match factory as a “server” and “packer” respectively. Abdola Ramtulla was 63, worked as

<sup>170</sup> Rubio, “Re: Asian Population - El Cerrito - Project - Hindus,” 2024; Rubio, “Factories - Stege, CA.”; Rubio, “Non-White Pop (El Cerrito).”; Rubio, “Hindus in El Cerrito - Stege, Richmond.”; Panas and Rubio, “Historical Context Statement Draft,” 43.; Belfils, “Historical Narratives - The Community’s Past - 1.”

<sup>171</sup> “Mohammedan Rites Are Observed at Funeral of Explosion Victims.”; “Stege Cap Plant Nearly Wrecked By Awful Explosion.”; “Victims of Works At Stege Are Interred.”



a laborer at the California Cap Company. Ramtulla, 42, his brother, also worked as a laborer at the California Cap Company. All of these men were listed as “white” and married. Shahbdin Singh had been married for 16 years (when he was 4), and Tolak Singh for 10 (when he was 10). Tolak could read and write, but Shahbdin could not. Abdola Ramtulla had been married for 57 years (when he was 6), and could not read or write. His brother Ramtulla, married for 39 years (when he was 3), was also unable to read or write. He had a son, Mohammed Newel, 12 years old, who went to school, and could read and write. He was also married when he was 7.<sup>172</sup>

Workers in these factories came from many different national and racial groups, notably Chinese workers in the Metropolitan Match Factory. There are some records of interracial relationships between the South Asians in the US and other groups. Notorious among them is the case of Said Ali in Stege. Said Ali, a worker at the Metropolitan Match Factory, murdered Rosa Domingo, his former partner in 1913. Said was 27, from Punjab, married, and a “Mohammedan”,<sup>173</sup> although he was referred to as a “Hindu”<sup>174</sup> and a “Sikh”<sup>175</sup> on different occasions. Many of the details of his life and peers are revealed in the coverage of this case. Said and his roommate, Musa Khan, used to be police officers in Hong Kong for 2 and 5 years

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<sup>172</sup> “1910 United States Federal Census - AncestryLibrary.Com,” accessed April 2, 2024, [https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/discoveryui-content/view/181225418:7884?tid=&pid=&queryId=a9e5d88a-fcbc-43e1-88c5-6cad92af85b4&\\_phsrc=GvO69&\\_phstart=successSource](https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/discoveryui-content/view/181225418:7884?tid=&pid=&queryId=a9e5d88a-fcbc-43e1-88c5-6cad92af85b4&_phsrc=GvO69&_phstart=successSource); “1910 United States Federal Census - AncestryLibrary.Com,” accessed April 2, 2024, [https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/discoveryui-content/view/181225434:7884?tid=&pid=&queryId=a9e5d88a-fcbc-43e1-88c5-6cad92af85b4&\\_phsrc=GvO69&\\_phstart=successSource](https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/discoveryui-content/view/181225434:7884?tid=&pid=&queryId=a9e5d88a-fcbc-43e1-88c5-6cad92af85b4&_phsrc=GvO69&_phstart=successSource); “1910 United States Federal Census - AncestryLibrary.Com,” accessed April 2, 2024, <https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/discoveryui-content/view/989702:7884>; “1910 United States Federal Census - AncestryLibrary.Com,” accessed April 2, 2024, <https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/discoveryui-content/view/989710:7884>; “1910 United States Federal Census - AncestryLibrary.Com,” accessed April 2, 2024, <https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/discoveryui-content/view/989745:7884>.

<sup>173</sup> “British Consul Tells of Said Ali Nativity,” *Richmond Daily Independent*, October 21, 1913, Richmond Museum of History and Culture, Richmond, CA.

<sup>174</sup> “British Consul Tells of Said Ali Nativity.”

<sup>175</sup> “British Consul Tells of Said Ali Nativity.”

respectively. Workers at the California Cap Company and the Metropolitan Match Factory were acquainted, as Said Ali bid them farewell and wished them luck after he was caught and sentenced to life in prison in San Quentin Prison.<sup>176</sup> The story of Said Ali also exemplifies the subordinate position of South Asians as British subjects. When he was caught, He was denied legal assistance from the British consul general.<sup>177</sup>

His victim, Rosa Domingo, was an 18-year old who worked in the factory and lived in a lodging house in South of Market, San Francisco.<sup>178</sup> She was from a Portuguese immigrant family that lived in Stege.<sup>179</sup> On page 43 of *Stranger Intimacy: Contesting Race, Sexuality and the Law in the North American West* by Nayan Shah, is a section titled “Passion and Murder of Rosa Domingo”, in which Shah describes the social climate and responses to this murder. At the time, unmarried young women were able to interact with men in an “urban commercial social world”.<sup>180</sup> These women lived in cities, away from their families, and worked to support themselves. Their agency enabled them to interact with men in third places such as diners. South Asian elites at the time described these interactions as “vicious urban commercial vice”,<sup>181</sup> which trapped unwitting South Asian men, of farmer and soldier background, who were working very hard, and had no home life. The elites presented these women and US culture as corrupting

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<sup>176</sup> “Hindu Gives Detailed Story of How He Killed Rosa Domingo at Stege.”; “All Murder Charges Are Sworn To.”; ““I Had Planned to Kill Her Long Before I Did’-Ali,” *Richmond Daily Independent*, October 15, 1913, Richmond Museum of History and Culture, Richmond, CA.; Anirvan Chatterjee, “Love, Murder, and the Great Hindoo Manhunt of 1913 – Secret Desi History,” April 13, 2018, <https://www.secretdesihistory.com/love-murder-and-the-great-hindoo-manhunt-of-1913>.

<sup>177</sup> “British Consul Tells of Said Ali Nativity.”

<sup>178</sup> “Strangler Held Her in Mystic Spell,” *San Francisco Call*, October 6, 1913, California Digital Newspaper Collection, <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/cgi-bin/cdnc?a=d&d=SFC19131006.2.7&e=-----en--20--1--txt-txIN----->; Anirvan Chatterjee, “Love, Murder, and the Great Hindoo Manhunt of 1913 – Secret Desi History,” April 13, 2018, <https://www.secretdesihistory.com/love-murder-and-the-great-hindoo-manhunt-of-1913>; Nayan Shah, *Stranger Intimacy: Contesting Race, Sexuality, and the Law in the North American West* (University of California Press, 2011), 44, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb32189.0001.001>.

<sup>179</sup> “Hindu Gives Detailed Story of How He Killed Rosa Domingo at Stege.”; Shah, *Stranger Intimacy*, 43

<sup>180</sup> Shah, *Stranger Intimacy*, 44.

<sup>181</sup> Shah, *Stranger Intimacy*, 45.

South Asia's supposed morality.<sup>182</sup> US American newspapers used this story to stigmatize interracial relationships themselves, and exoticize South Asian men. This happened 4 years before the 1917 Barred Zone Act, which prevented South Asian immigrants from arriving.<sup>183</sup>

Within groups of South Asian workers, there isn't clear evidence that the workers in Stege were organized similarly to the trend of South Asian workers in California, who tended to group together to form employment support networks.<sup>184</sup> However, accounts of their interactions point towards strong social connections. Said Ali was able to evade arrest for a few weeks because he connected with South Asians he knew in Southern California, who were able to host him.<sup>185</sup> The funeral of the Afghanistani workers in 1914 was well-attended and the newspaper articles describe a strong sense of camaraderie between the workers.<sup>186</sup>

Unfortunately, their jobs were really dangerous. They were working with explosives, and workplace accidents were brutal. There were many newspaper articles published in the early 1900s that dealt with deaths of South Asian workers in Stege's factories. Specifically, they called out dangerous mining industry work. Working in the mining industry led to disastrous consequences for the health, safety, and life of those workers. Moreover, the injured or dead workers themselves tended to be blamed for these accidents.

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<sup>182</sup> Shah, *Stranger Intimacy*, 44-45.

<sup>183</sup> Shah, *Stranger Intimacy*, 44-45.

<sup>184</sup> Misrow, "East Indian Immigration on the Pacific Coast.," 22-23.

<sup>185</sup> Shah, *Stranger Intimacy*, 45

<sup>186</sup> "Victims of Works At Stege Are Interred.," "Stege Cap Plant Nearly Wrecked By Awful Explosion.," "Mohammedan Rites Are Observed at Funeral of Explosion Victims."

An article from 1911 was subtitled “Glam (sic.) Mohammed is Blown to Atoms in Explosion at California Cap Works”.<sup>187</sup> The passage below read “An explosion ... resulting in the death of ... an employe (sic.)”.<sup>188</sup> It later reads that they do not know the cause of the explosion, but that it is theorized that “he entered the magazines with a lighted cigarette, contrary to the rules”.<sup>189</sup> The article then went on to deny the possibility that there may have been safety issues with the factory infrastructure. It also mentions that he had a brother in Acampo, near Stockton. The excessive use of passive voice in this article shifts blame from the factory managers and owners, and paints it as a freak accident. It also attempts to discredit the victim. Glam Mohammed was mentioned again in an article titled “Arabic Funeral Held Yesterday”.<sup>190</sup> They mention that A. T. L. Khan, a “Mohammedan priest”,<sup>191</sup> came from Sacramento to perform the final rites. The article also tries to shift the blame of his own demise on Mohammed: “It is not known whether he went into the place with a lighted cigarette, or whether he slammed the door behind him as he went in”.<sup>192</sup> They do not mention anything about the infrastructure being dangerous to begin with.

There was another explosion that killed workers at Cap Works 3 years later, in September, 1914, about 7 years after the “race riots”<sup>193</sup> against the South Asian Stege workers. The first article covering it is titled “Stege Cap Plant Nearly Wrecked by Awful Explosion”.<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> “Arabic Funeral Held Yesterday,” *Richmond Daily Independent*, October 20, 1911, Richmond Museum of History and Culture, Richmond, CA.; “Man Killed by Explosion,” *Richmond Daily Independent*, October 17, 1911, Richmond Museum of History and Culture, Richmond, CA.

<sup>188</sup> “Arabic Funeral Held Yesterday.”; “Man Killed by Explosion.”

<sup>189</sup> “Arabic Funeral Held Yesterday.”; “Man Killed by Explosion.”

<sup>190</sup> “Arabic Funeral Held Yesterday.”; “Man Killed by Explosion.”

<sup>191</sup> “Arabic Funeral Held Yesterday.”; “Man Killed by Explosion.”

<sup>192</sup> “Arabic Funeral Held Yesterday.”; “Man Killed by Explosion.”

<sup>193</sup> “White Workmen Protest Against Hindu Toilers.”

<sup>194</sup> “Victims of Works At Stege Are Interred.”; “Stege Cap Plant Nearly Wrecked By Awful Explosion.”; “Mohammedan Rites Are Observed at Funeral of Explosion Victims.”

Then, they go on to mention, as seemingly an afterthought, that 2 men were killed in the explosion and that their remains were “being picked up piecemeal”<sup>195</sup> They were referred to as “Hindus”, and named Said Afid, and Tetza Mohammed. Another person, whose name was Musa Ali, was also injured (if not dead). We also hear the person in charge of the factory, named Superintendent Campbell, opine that the two workers were careless, and probably dropped the explosives in a hurry. They also mention that “girls”<sup>196</sup> were employed in the filling room of the factory. A short article titled “Victims of Works at Stege Are Interred” was published in the Richmond Daily Independent. It mentions “Mohammedan funeral services”<sup>197</sup> for two victims of an explosion in California Cap Works a week prior. They mention that the well-attended funeral was conducted by “Mohammedan priests”,<sup>198</sup> and that the remains were taken to the Sunset View cemetery via automobile. What I gleaned from this article is that there was a strong sense of community among South Asian factory workers, and/or other people in the area. Secondly, it is apparent that there was very little awareness of Islam and its practices, as they were referred to as “priests”. It also informs us of their resting place - at Sunset View cemetery in El Cerrito. Another article titled “Mohammedan Rites are Observed at Funeral of Explosion Victims” discusses their deaths. A point to note is that the title of this article centers the Muslim funeral rites as the point of interest in the article, rather than the deaths of the workers. They also refer to them as “Mohammedans”,<sup>199</sup> rather than people, or workers. The services were conducted at

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<sup>195</sup> “Victims of Works At Stege Are Interred.”; “Stege Cap Plant Nearly Wrecked By Awful Explosion.”; “Mohammedan Rites Are Observed at Funeral of Explosion Victims.”

<sup>196</sup> “Victims of Works At Stege Are Interred.”; “Stege Cap Plant Nearly Wrecked By Awful Explosion.”; “Mohammedan Rites Are Observed at Funeral of Explosion Victims.”

<sup>197</sup> “Victims of Works At Stege Are Interred.”; “Stege Cap Plant Nearly Wrecked By Awful Explosion.”; “Mohammedan Rites Are Observed at Funeral of Explosion Victims.”

<sup>198</sup> “Victims of Works At Stege Are Interred.”; “Stege Cap Plant Nearly Wrecked By Awful Explosion.”; “Mohammedan Rites Are Observed at Funeral of Explosion Victims.”

<sup>199</sup> “Victims of Works At Stege Are Interred.”; “Stege Cap Plant Nearly Wrecked By Awful Explosion.”; “Mohammedan Rites Are Observed at Funeral of Explosion Victims.”

Smallwood (now Civic Center) Chapel in Richmond with “a large host of attentive friends”.<sup>200</sup> The names of the deceased were changed from the original coverage a few days prior, to Seid Lallshah and Taza Khan. They were from Afghanistan. People speaking at the service were M. Barakatullah from the Islamic Fraternity, an unnamed Japanese official from the School of Foreign Languages, and Fuzal Ahamad (title unknown).

In 1917, workers of Chinese origin were also killed. The newspaper article reporting this incident described the damages as “small”,<sup>201</sup> because their equipment and facilities totally amounted to a 3000\$ loss for the owners of Cap Works. 8 people were employed at this station, in the powder room. There is very little said about the dead, critically injured, or others present - except that some had Chinese ancestry. One of them was quoted, saying “It all go in a second - - poof”.<sup>202</sup> The superintendent at the time was named Archie Campbell, who helped a jury decide that the cause of the explosion was unknown. In *History of Contra Costa County, California*, published in 1926, this explosion is attributed to “a Chinaman dropping a tray of caps.”<sup>203</sup>

So what became of these people? It is difficult to track this group. Many of them were excluded from traditional records such as the census.<sup>204</sup> This might be because they are largely considered to be a transient population.<sup>205</sup> South Asians were traveling from place to place in

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<sup>200</sup> “Victims of Works At Stege Are Interred.”; “Stege Cap Plant Nearly Wrecked By Awful Explosion.”; “Mohammedan Rites Are Observed at Funeral of Explosion Victims.”

<sup>201</sup> “Stege Cap Works Explosion Proves Mystery to Jury,” March 29, 1917, Richmond Museum of History and Culture, Richmond, CA.

<sup>202</sup> “Stege Cap Works Explosion Proves Mystery to Jury.”

<sup>203</sup> *History of Contra Costa County, California; with biographical sketches of the leading men and women of the county who have been identified with its growth and development from the early days to the present*, 336.

<sup>204</sup> Chalana, “Whither the ‘Hindu Invasion’? South Asians in the Pacific Northwest of the United States, 1907-1930.,” 23.

<sup>205</sup> Shah, *Stranger Intimacy*, 45

order to secure employment. As many of them came from a farming background in Punjab, they tended to move to agriculture inland.<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> McMahon, "Chapter 3: From Laborers to Landowners."

## Conclusion

What does this group tell us about the social, political, and economic position of South Asians in the Bay Area? The hints at this answer are contradictory at times. There is one story, about white labor unions, and their disdain towards South Asian workers.<sup>207</sup> This history, combined with the advocacy of elite, caste-privileged South Asians, uncomfortably leads to a distinction that the US government made between “skilled” and “unskilled” workers among South Asian immigrants. Another story is of relations between ethnic groups as the West Coast was urbanizing, and social mores were relaxing. Primarily white US Americans crafted specific stigmas and fears about South Asian inter-ethnic relations - as seen in the dialogue around Rosa Domingo’s murder by Said Ali.<sup>208</sup> More contentious is the role of early urban immigrants, some of whom were South Asian, in violently driving out Native Americans.<sup>209</sup>

The demographic composition of early South Asian immigrants is fuzzy. Census takers misrepresented South Asian populations, and the populations themselves were, on many occasions, transient and moved between jobs quickly. Additionally, South Asian immigrants were discussing their caste-privilege as a means to categorize themselves as white. As data was not meticulously collected or made available about the caste-background of early immigrants, their exact composition is unknown. However, the Ghadar Party, a San Francisco-based organization of South Asians advocating for India’s independence from British colonization, published a document where they discuss, by way of agreement, the intertwining of

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<sup>207</sup> “Report of Proceedings of the ... Annual Convention of the American Federation of Labor 32 1912.,” 217; *Proceedings of the Asiatic Exclusion League 1908-1912*, 14, 215, 247, 266-7, 341-7, 369-377, 442-5, 497-499, 513, 546-7, 583-4, 679, 711.

<sup>208</sup> Shah, *Stranger Intimacy*, 43-52.

<sup>209</sup> “Sea to Shining Sea,” 129-130.; Chatterjee and Ghosh, “Immigration, Immigrants, and Visitors (in Progress).”



caste-privilege and whiteness.<sup>210</sup> Some of the party's membership was not elite.<sup>211</sup> With these inspiring stories comes an uncertainty about which groups of South Asian American immigrants were excluded and invisibilized by the elite South Asian narrative, which may or may not be reconciled by existing research.

The immigrants at Stege are similarly hard to pin down, and draw rigid conclusions about their wealth background, caste, and even the trajectories of their lives. They formed relationships with people around them, and sent remittances home. Many of them may have participated in the Ghadar Party's efforts to decolonize South Asia. They contributed directly to the mining industry and match industry on the West Coast, but were exposed to danger and death in this process. They were a group with immense tenacity - having survived and persevered through numerous attempts to push them out of the US. Creating a history about the industrial development and urbanization of the Bay Area would be incomplete without the contributions of the South Asian workers.

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<sup>210</sup> Ram Chandra Bharadwaj, "Exclusion of Hindus from America Due to British Influence" (San Francisco, California, 1916), 21-23, <https://www.saada.org/item/20100916-121>.

<sup>211</sup> "The Ghadar Party was a coalition of Punjabi migrant workers and Bengali and Punjabi intellectuals and students" in Seema Sohi, "Ghadar Party," in *Our Stories: An Introduction to South Asian America* (South Asian American Digital Archive, 2021), 37.

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Badly That They Will Not Crowd White Labor out of the Mills,' the Growing Mob Rallied and Went to Work. The Rioters Moved through Town, Breaking Windows, Throwing Rocks, Indiscriminately Beating People, Overpowering a Few Police Officers, and Pulling Men out of Their Workplaces and Homes. They Eventually Rounded up Two Hundred or so of the South Asian Immigrant Workers in the Basement of City Hall to Stay the Night. For a Variety of Reasons, the First Wave of South Asian Migrants to North American Came Mainly from the Doaba Region of the Punjab in Northern India. The Railway System Introduced to the Country by British Colonialism Helped Facilitate Easier Travel from the Landlocked Punjab to Seaports by the Late 1800s. The Rioters Were Said to Number at Least 500, and Accounts Describe a Mob That Grew and Separated into Groups through the Night, Some Attacking Living Quarters and Other Marching to Lumber Mills. Five Men Were Arrested and Jailed and Police Handcuffed Two Others Described as Boys but Released Them When Surrounded by a Mob. The Action Was the First in a Series of Attacks on 'Hindus' in Washington State and British Columbia, but It Was Not the First Anti-Asian Action in the Bellingham Area. By September 17, the Last Few Remaining Residents from India Were Evicted, and for Many Decades Most People from South Asia Avoided Bellingham and Whatcom County. It Was Not until the Late 1980s and 1990s That Some Sikh Families Began to Move to the Area, and Today the Punjabi Sikh Community in Whatcom County Has Grown to about 4,000 People. Sources: Gerald N. Hallberg. 'Bellingham, Washington's Anti-Hindu Riot' Northwest Mosaics. 1973". Margaret A. Gibson. Accommodation without Assimilation: Sikh Immigrants in an American High School. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988. Image Sources: Colliers, Sept. 28, 1907. Caption from Dodd, W.D. 'The Hindu in the Northwest.' World Today, Vol. 13, 1907, Colliers, Sept. 28, 1907." Instagram post, October 20, 2021. [https://www.instagram.com/p/CVPhn99v16B/?img\\_index=2](https://www.instagram.com/p/CVPhn99v16B/?img_index=2).

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