THE ARGUMENT FOR AN ACTIVIST SOUTH ASIAN AMERICAN STUDIES

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Abstract. This article makes a case for foregrounding activism in South Asian American studies (SAAS) as a means of grappling with contemporary political crises and structural inequalities. Situating SAAS within the broader field of Asian American studies (AAS), I engage two key interventions: Tamara Bhalla and Pawan Dhingra's call to centralize "privilege" in SAAS (particularly caste- and class-based) and Diane Fujino and Robyn Rodriguez's reminder to re-center activism in shaping forward directions for AAS. I explore how SAAS might continue taking inspiration from the original political commitments of ethnic studies—communal self-determination, liberation, and cross-racial solidarity—while also recognizing the diaspora's internal complexities and contradictions. Drawing from my own experiences as an ethnic studies educator and a grassroots organizer, I illustrate how an activist-oriented approach can more deeply connect SAAS scholarship with on-the-ground struggles. These include movements addressing labor exploitation, environmental justice, and racialized/gendered violence as well as transnational solidarities that bring South Asian Americans into shared cause with other marginalized groups. In articulating these possibilities, I argue that the future of SAAS is best served by cultivating commitments that bridge rigorous academic inquiry with ongoing grassroots organizing.

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COMMON PURPOSE WITH ETHNIC STUDIES

My entry into ethnic studies (and eventually Asian American studies) did not originate in a strictly academic milieu, but rather through more than fifteen years of community political organizing. Much of that work took place building with youth in Oakland, California, across predominantly Black, Brown, and mixed-race neighborhoods. Those organizing experiences functioned as living laboratories of struggle and resistance, where categories of identity, race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, and ability converged with critical questions of power and privilege.

As my activism deepened, I gravitated toward spaces where intellectual work was explicitly informed by "boots on the ground" organizing. This alignment charted a path to lecturing in the College of Ethnic Studies (CoES) at San Francisco State University (SFSU). Over half a decade in that setting, I discovered both a community and a scholarly practice that validated the knowledge generated in movements for social justice. Rather than relegating grassroots organizing to footnotes, SFSU's CoES ethos placed such experience at the center of curricular and pedagogical innovation.

This intellectual-activist synergy continued when I joined the Department of Asian American Studies at California State University, Northridge (CSUN). Both these public universities have strong commitments to bridging campus and community. My teaching and research revolve around linking theoretical inquiries on power, racial formation, and social change with real-world struggles to dismantle structural oppression. In the process, I came to realize how these intersecting sites could also shape the future of South Asian American studies (SAAS).[1]

SAAS remains a relatively new yet rapidly growing subfield within Asian American studies. Many faculty and students who identify as South Asian are pressing for more resources and scholarly attention to the unique histories and challenges faced by diasporic communities from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and beyond. This momentum is reflected in course enrollments, conference panels, and the publishing landscape. But, amid that growth, questions arise about the ongoing goals of our subfield. Should we focus primarily on cultural representation? Should we cultivate a critique of U.S. empire alongside transnational solidarity? Should we remain anchored in the foundational commitments that spurred the birth of ethnic studies?

Reflecting on these questions, I advocate for an activist-oriented SAAS, one capable of supporting transformative social change in tandem with rigorous scholarship. This vision underscores that our intellectual work is not, and

should never be, an end in and of itself but rather an instrument to strengthen and learn from grassroots movements.

TO WHAT END DO WE STUDY?

Both the historical arc and the stated purpose of ethnic studies are bound up with urgent political commitments. The 1968 student strikers at San Francisco State College (and elsewhere) demanded that universities abandon their complacent role in reproducing a western cultural hegemony by offering dedicated spaces to learn about struggles for self-determination and liberation of the Third World and its peoples.[2] Their advocacy shaped the institutional birth of Asian American studies, Africana and African American studies, Chicano/a and Latino/a studies, Native American studies, and related fields.

Fast-forward to the present, and we see how ethnic studies programs, once considered critical interventions, have been partially "normalized" within the neoliberal university. The language of diversity and multiculturalism has often replaced the more politically focused language of anti-imperialism and anti-capitalism. The question "To what end do we study?" remains as pressing as ever, particularly when discussing the future of subfields like South Asian American studies.

Activist scholars Diane C. Fujino and Robyn Rodriguez caution that the founding spirit of Asian American studies informed by grassroots activism, protest, and radical imagination has been diluted over time. They propose restoring a focus on Asian American activism as a distinct subfield, arguing that understanding and theorizing social movements is indispensable for any genuinely liberatory project.[3] Meanwhile, Tamara Bhalla and Pawan Dhingra encourage confronting the reality of "privilege" especially around class, caste, and professional status in contemporary South Asian American communities.[4]

Yet we must not lose sight of why this confrontation with privilege matters. If scholarship on "privilege" remains purely descriptive such as counting economic disparities or critiquing social capital, then it risks detachment from concrete processes of dismantling oppressive structures. The real question is whether we engage power in a way that helps reorient our institutions and our communities toward collective liberation.

Bhalla and Dhingra's critiques highlight how SAAS often centers the most marginalized segments of the diaspora but fails to scrutinize the influence of relatively elite formations.[5] There is indeed a need for more nuanced analysis of how classed and caste-based advantages work within U.S. racial hierarchies. Yet such a focus, if severed from activism, may devolve into academic critique

that does little to challenge the flows of capital, policy decisions, and social structures perpetuating inequality.

I argue that the real test for SAAS (and for ethnic studies more generally) is whether it is accountable to the communities it purports to serve. Re-centering activism underscores that studying social phenomena should be inseparable from dismantling exploitative systems and building more liberatory futures.

SOUTH ASIAN AMERICAN STUDIES, ASIAN AMERICAN STUDIES, AND THE QUESTION OF PRIVILEGE

SAAS exists in a complex relationship with AAS. On one hand, the diaspora of South Asian Americans, now among the fastest-growing populations in the United States, contributes to the overall diversity of Asian America.[6] On the other hand, differences in language, religion, caste, and culture mean that South Asians have been racialized in ways that can diverge from East or Southeast Asians' experiences.[7]

This complexity creates tensions in how SAAS is situated: Are we simply another sub-branch of AAS, replicating the same methods and frameworks? Or should SAAS carve out unique approaches suited to the specificities of caste politics, religious nationalisms, and regional migrant histories that shape the South Asian diaspora? Indeed, Indian Americans alone comprise a substantial portion of the "Asian American" category, with significant educational and economic privileges relative to some other groups. Meanwhile, communities from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bhutan often face distinct sets of barriers ranging from Islamophobia and anti-refugee sentiment to marginalization based on language or faith.

Further complicating matters is the frequently referenced data point that South Asian Americans (especially Indian Americans) have high household incomes compared to national averages.[8] Though such an aggregate statistic obscures real socioeconomic diversity, it also feeds into model minority myths. Bhalla and Dhingra, in "The Privilege of South Asian American Studies," question how SAAS should address this overlay of genuine disadvantage for some alongside exceptional advantage for others. They advocate centralizing the subject of South Asian American privilege so that we don't overlook how wealthier or higher-status segments of the community shape U.S. policies, diaspora activism, and cultural narratives.[9]

Yet, examining privilege within SAAS is not simply a matter of rehashing guilt or moral reckoning. The deeper issue is that ignoring privilege can hinder our grasp of how power operates within and around the diaspora, whether in the form of right-wing mobilizations, corporate ascendancy, philanthropic spheres, or other domains where relative advantage confers outsized influence. To fully understand the diaspora's political and social impact, we must track how elites align themselves with or stand in opposition to broader social movements.

Ethnic studies was conceived as a challenge to systems of racial capitalism, hetero-patriarchy, and colonialism. When SAAS neglects its foundation in that lineage, it risks devolving into a narrowly defined cultural or identity project. We can, however, sustain the community-responsive heart of ethnic studies by studying how diaspora communities—privileged or not—contribute to anti-racist struggles, labor movements, immigration reform, and transnational solidarities. Such research can highlight how even privileged South Asians might join broader social justice causes yet do so with an awareness of how that same privilege can subtly reproduce existing hierarchies.

In short, to address privilege is to interrogate how structural inequalities are perpetuated as well as contested. SAAS will benefit from following not just the broad comparative frameworks of AAS, but also the historical mission of ethnic studies to transform the conditions under which marginalized peoples labor and live. Re-centering activism helps achieve that aim, connecting theoretical analysis with collective struggles that push for social justice.

POWER, PRIVILEGE, AND ANTI-SOLIDARITY

In diaspora politics, power consolidates in intricate ways. While many grassroots groups organize in solidarity with other marginalized populations, in recent years mobilizations shaped by caste and class privileges have given rise to a phenomenon that I've dubbed "anti-solidarity."[10] A prominent example is the strengthening of Hindu nationalist ideologies among segments of the Indian diaspora. These conservative movements claim marginality in the American context, co-opting discourses reminiscent of racial or Indigenous struggles, while supporting authoritarian agendas in the subcontinent.

The phenomenon of "anti-solidarity" underscores how right-wing groups can appropriate the language of justice to serve majoritarian interests. For example, diasporic factions may claim parallels with Black Lives Matter or Indigenous sovereignty yet deny or suppress the struggles of non-Hindu, caste-oppressed communities, or Indigenous peoples in the homeland.[11] These

efforts strategically deploy the rhetoric of oppression to caste Hindus (often of dominant caste status) as the real victims while erasing the structural realities faced by Dalits, Muslims, Christians, and Adivasis in South Asia, and indeed by various oppressed communities worldwide.

At the same time, we cannot reduce the diaspora to a monolithic right-wing presence. Many South Asian Americans organize around anti-caste activism, environmental justice, labor, and other interlinked areas where they build genuine solidarity with Black, Chicanx/Latinx, and Indigenous communities in the United States. The coexistence of progressive, revolutionary left, conservative right, and reactionary diasporic formations (for lack of better categories) points to the importance of mapping how class, caste, religion, gender/sexuality, and political orientation converge.

Privileged segments of the diaspora sometimes leverage their social and economic capital to influence policy or shape U.S. public discourse, creating philanthropic or nonprofit organizations that set the terms of debate. While these spaces can occasionally foster progressive interventions, they can also blunt counter-power forms of organizing by directing energy into more reformist channels. Understanding such dynamics is vital for an activist-oriented SAAS: if we want to support truly liberatory struggles, we must be attentive to which strategies are co-opted and which remain transformative.

Likewise, "anti-solidarity" tactics can obscure alliances that might otherwise be formed between South Asians and other oppressed groups. When diaspora elites or religious nationalists garner media attention (especially in these contexts) the public may conflate all South Asian Americans with reactionary posturing. Not to mention, younger or less-resourced activists then face the task of discerning which groups and initiatives are genuinely committed to social justice as they try to ally with Indigenous movements for self-determination, other communities of color for immigrant rights, anti-police brutality campaigns, climate action, and so on.

Hence, power and privilege within the diaspora invite nuanced and ongoing analysis. Rather than framing the diaspora solely as a site of assimilation or progressive activism, we must recognize that internal hierarchies, shaped by gender, religion, caste, and class, can produce "anti-solidarity" politics that mimic and distort real justice movements. An activist-centered SAAS therefore necessitates a clear-eyed assessment of power relations, ensuring that our scholarship reveals, rather than enables, the deployment of privilege against genuinely oppressed populations.

ARGUING THE CASE FOR SOUTH ASIAN AMERICAN ACTIVISM STUDIES

In "The Legibility of Asian American Activism Studies," Fujino and Rodriguez remind us that activism once stood at the center of Asian American studies, guiding both pedagogical and research priorities. Over time, they note, the field's ties to grassroots movements have weakened, partly because of the professionalization of higher education. They call for a renewed subfield—"Asian American activism studies"—that would examine and document social movements while also partnering with them in real time.[12]

Extending this idea, I argue for a South Asian American activism studies to be explicitly recognized and cultivated within SAAS. Such a move would build upon existing scholarship both within and beyond academia that tracks the multiple ways South Asian Americans intersect with grassroots struggles. From taxi worker organizing in New York City to climate activism in the American West, from protests against Islamophobic travel bans to alliances with Indigenous sovereignty efforts, South Asian Americans have participated in transformative political projects.

This activist lineage is already present in the work of South Asian scholar-organizers whose praxis-oriented research models what this subfield could look like in action. For instance, Harsha Walia and Biju Mathew offer powerful examples of knowledge production that is not only community-accountable but movement-generated. Walia, a longtime organizer with No One Is Illegal, builds her scholarship alongside struggles for migrant justice, Indigenous sovereignty, housing rights, and racial and gender justice.[13] Her framing of "border imperialism" challenges liberal multicultural narratives by revealing how immigration regimes are structured by settler colonialism and global capitalism. Rather than studying borders as legal structures, Walia theorizes them as technologies of racialized exclusion shaped through and against grassroots resistance.[14] Similarly, Biju Mathew's sustained work with the New York Taxi Workers Alliance, the National Taxi Workers Alliance, and transnational efforts like the Mining Zone Peoples Solidarity Group redefines labor ethnography as a collective practice. His research emerges from and feeds back into the organizing strategies of working-class South Asian immigrants.[15] Across both cases, knowledge is not extracted from communities but coproduced with them, foregrounding lived struggle as a generative site of theory.

These scholar-activists exemplify a mode of South Asian American studies that does not merely describe power but intervenes in it. Their work underscores how activist ethnography, movement-aligned research, and community-based

knowledge challenge the privatization of academic labor and offer alternative epistemologies grounded in justice. For SAAS to realize its liberatory potential, it must not only document such efforts but build frameworks that recognize them as foundational. This means developing curricular pathways, mentorship practices, and research agendas that prepare students to not only navigate but also transform the power structures shaping diaspora life.

Despite the significance of such models, they remain understudied and insufficiently centered in the field's core scholarship. Recognizing their contributions as more than exceptional cases opens the door to reimagining what South Asian American studies can prioritize going forward.[16] Further, an intentional subfield, one that foregrounds "activism studies" as an organizing principle, would enable us to systematically analyze how these many efforts converge or diverge, how privilege operates among participants, and how local campaigns dovetail with transnational priorities.[17]

Crucially, such a subfield would also reorient SAAS research agendas. Instead of waiting for movement-generated knowledge to trickle into academic journals (akin to cutting-edge music taking years to hit commercial airwaves), we could create collaborative projects that bring scholars and activists together from the outset. Oral histories, relational archives, community-driven research, and participatory action methodologies could all feature prominently. An "activism studies" orientation embraces the original charge of ethnic studies: bridging theory and practice to serve communities in struggle.

This approach does not imply that every scholar must be a full-time organizer. Rather, it underscores that intellectual labor can be most impactful when done in close conversation with real-world campaigns for social change. It also ensures that students of SAAS, often looking for avenues to blend academic engagement with community work, have a structured pathway to connect those dots. Since many diaspora communities themselves are heterogeneous, an activist framing can help students learn how to navigate and analyze caste, class, and religious differences without losing sight of shared possibilities for solidarity.

Hence, building a South Asian American activism studies subfield could invigorate not only SAAS but ethnic studies more broadly. It aligns with the impetus to make scholarship actionable, fosters alliances with other racial/ethnic communities facing parallel challenges, and offers a space where we might critically examine privilege without detaching from the real, material fights for justice that define so many South Asian American lives.

TO DREAM IT ANYWAY

"How are we going to use Asian American studies critique and praxis to help build the next forty years of Asian American studies, and more importantly to help build a better today?" This question, posed in the June 2022 issue of the *Journal of Asian American Studies*, resonates powerfully for anyone thinking about the trajectory of SAAS.[18] Re-centering activism in SAAS is not merely an academic gesture but a strategic imperative especially when we consider the examples already set by scholar-organizers. Their work reminds us that research can emerge from and feed back into movements, and that rigorous critique is most potent when rooted in collective struggle.

A South Asian American activism studies framework requires us to engage the contradictions that emerge when diaspora communities straddle significant privilege in one arena and real vulnerability in another. It challenges the notion that cultural representation alone is a sufficient goal. More importantly, it refuses to relegate knowledge production to a purely observer role. Instead, it opens space for co-creation: for oral histories, community-embedded research, and collaborative theorizing with those on the front lines of justice work. In doing so, it aligns with and revitalizes the founding spirit of ethnic studies: to produce knowledge in service of liberation.

Yet, we must acknowledge the barriers to such a vision. The demands of academic life such as publishing pressures, tenure requirements, administrative metrics often push scholars toward safer, more conventional projects. Grassroots movements, meanwhile, operate under tight timelines, unpredictable funding, and intensifying political threats. Bridging these worlds calls for intentional infrastructure: institutional support for engaged scholarship, spaces for collaboration between organizers and academics, and recognition that community-accountable work is not "extracurricular" but essential to the mission of the field.

Despite these challenges, there are reasons for optimism. Ethnic studies itself was born of struggle, not institutional generosity. Today's intersecting crises including, but not limited to climate catastrophe, racial capitalism, caste violence, and authoritarian nationalism demand that we once again orient our intellectual labor toward transformation. South Asian American communities are also shifting; younger generations often enter academic spaces already primed to ask deeper questions about power, solidarity, and justice. They are looking for models of scholarship that don't just analyze the world but help change it.

To "dream it anyway" means to persist with this activist orientation despite institutional and ideological pressures. It means forging collaborations among

students, organizers, faculty, and broader publics, such that the knowledge we produce is not only about diaspora conditions but also for the flourishing of those communities. Anchoring SAAS in activism is one route to maintaining fidelity to the spirit of ethnic studies, ensuring that our field remains a dynamic force for transformation in a world that sorely needs it.

NOTES

1. The writing that follows draws from a draft paper prepared for the "South Asian American Studies: The Future of the Field" panel at the Association of Asian American Studies conference in Long Beach, California, in April 2023 where Tamara Bhalla presented a shortened version of an essay cowritten with Pawan Dhingra titled "The Privilege of South Asian American Studies." The panel was framed in conversation with this work. I expanded my paper through a workshop organized in October 2023 by the Civil Discourse and Social Change Faculty Research Brown Bag Series at California State University, Northridge that benefitted from encouraging notes received from colleagues Daniel Olmos and Khanum Shaik. Thereafter, I recrafted the paper into this article for *JAAS*, reducing its length in half, with the help of a generous review by friend and colleague Ali Mir.
2. The use of the term "Third World" in this context is/was deliberate. The study of the history of Third World struggles is the genesis of Third World Studies, something late-1960s striking students at SF State (through their Third World Liberation Front coalition) expressed an ideological affection towards as they demanded a Third World curriculum for the public state university. This curriculum was later (somewhat problematically) brokered into what we now refer to as ethnic studies. Thereby eliminating at birth, what was to be Third World Studies—an explicitly and more resolute political project. For deeper engagement on this see: Gary Okhiro, *Third World Studies: Theorizing Liberation* (Duke University Press, 2016).
3. Diane C. Fujino and Robyn M. Rodriguez, "The Legibility of Asian American Activism Studies," *Amerasia Journal*, 45, no. 2 (2019): 111–136 and Diane C. Fujino and Robyn Magalit Rodriguez, eds., *Contemporary Asian American Activism: Building Movements for Liberation* (University of Washington Press, 2022).
4. Tamara Bhalla and Pawan Dhingra, "The Privilege of South Asian American Studies," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 25, no. 2 (2022): 307-318.
5. Bhalla and Dhingra, "The Privilege of South Asian American Studies."
6. See American Community Survey 2021 1-Year Estimates Table B02015 that shows South Asians making up 23 percent of the overall Asian American population in 2011, vs. 29 percent in 2021.
7. Nazli Kibria, "Not Asian, Black, or White? Reflections on South Asian American Racial Identity," *Amerasia Journal* 22, no. 2 (1996): 77–86.
8. "Demographic Snapshot of South Asians in the United States" report, South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT), April 2019, https://saalt.org/wp-content/

uploads/2019/04/SAALT-Demographic-Snapshot-2019.pdf and Deepa Iyer's *We Too Sing America: South Asian, Arab, Muslim, and Sikh Immigrants Shape our Multicultural Future* (The New Press, 2017).

9. Bhalla and Dhingra, "The Privilege of South Asian American Studies."

10. For example, Chinese right-wing activist mobilizations against affirmative action at Harvard University (2023–2024), or the gathering of support for Peter Liang (the Chinese American police officer responsible for the 2014 killing of Akai Gurley, a Black father), or Hindu nationalist mobilizations to rewrite California textbooks (2005–2009, 2016–2017).

11. We saw this when diasporic Hindu nationalist groups participated in a process of racial formation by seeking to co-opt advancements made by Black Lives Matter and the Movement for Black Lives (i.e., Hindu Lives Matter) and other struggles, such as solidarity mobilizing around Standing Rock (making claims to Indigeneity through false equivalencies) to assert a mantel of unique oppression in the U.S. while creating implausible proximities to other oppressed groups. Nishant Upadhyay's work details these contradiction noting cases where the Hindu right (that is also currently in central leadership of India) positions caste-Hindus as "Indigenous" to the Indian subcontinent. This is a central discourse to their nationalist propaganda and in claiming this Indigeneity to South Asia, they've worked to envelop actual Indigenous Adivasi peoples and tribes into the Hindu fold. See Upadhyay's "Casted Solidarities, Hindu Right, and Decolonial Relationalities," (conference paper, AAAS, April 2023) and *Indians on Indian Lands: Intersections of Race, Caste, and Indigeneity* (University of Illinois Press, 2024).

12. Diane C. Fujino and Robyn M. Rodriguez, "The Legibility of Asian American Activism Studies," *Amerasia Journal*, 45, no. 2 (2019): 111–36 and Diane C. Fujino and Robyn Magalit Rodriguez, eds., *Contemporary Asian American Activism: Building Movements for Liberation* (University of Washington Press, 2022.)

13. Though Harsha Walia is based in Canada, her work has found deep relevance across North America.

14. Harsha Walia, *Undoing Border Imperialism* (AK Press, 2013) and *Border & Rule: Global Migration, Capitalism, and the Rise of Racist Nationalism* (Haymarket Books, 2021).

15. Biju Mathew, *Taxi! Cabs and Capitalism in New York City* (ILR Press, 2005.)

16. Other examples of North American South Asian scholarship produced along the lines of activist studies includes, but is not limited to, the activist/intellectual work of Sunaina Maira, Maia Ramnath, and Roja Singh (who is also the president of Dalit Solidarity Forum). And examples outside the Academy (at the intersection of intellectual work, reportage, and activism) include Suchitra Vijayan's work with the POLIS project and the work of Kashmiri journalist turned intellectual practitioner, Raquib Hameed Naik. The list goes on.

17. Inspired by this manuscript, I further fleshed this work out in a draft conference paper, "South Asian American Activism and the Question of Privilege," presented at the Association of Asian American Studies (AAAS) conference in April 2025.

18. See *Journal of Asian American Studies* 25, no. 2 (June 2022).