

APPENDICES

**Appendix A**

Veronica Sudesh and Sanzida Habib  
A Report on the Conference

**Appendix B**

Conference Program



## **A REPORT ON THE CONFERENCE**

This conference was truly an academically and intellectually enriching platform for young people to share their research related to South Asian diaspora as well as their ideas and experiences of growing up and un/becoming a Canadian of South Asian descent. The conference brought together students, youth, and alumni from a number of colleges and universities beyond Simon Fraser University, which hosted the daylong event on April 6th, 2019. Following the brief inauguration and welcome notes by the conference organizers and the awe-inspiring keynote speech by renowned South Asian feminist activist Harsha Walia, a total of 16 presenters spoke on various topics in four differently themed sessions comprised of individual papers as well as one panel comprised of two students and moderated by their professor at Kwantlen Polytechnic University.

In this report, we present our personal perspectives, accounts, and reflections related to the overall conference and the various presentations in all the sessions including the final panel. To avoid repetition of the summary of individual papers described in the Proceedings' Introduction, we have included below a short summary of only those oral presentations that have not been submitted as complete written papers by the authors to be published in the Proceedings. This will give the reader a glimpse of the diverse topics and range of issues discussed in this conference as well as an overview of the unpublished but powerful presentations.

### **SESSION I: IDENTITY, CULTURAL HYBRIDITY, AND BELONGING**

The first session, standing true to its theme, explored the diverse and complex life experiences of Canadian South Asian youth as they navigate their hybrid identities as well as a plethora of ambiguities that come along with that process. This navigation, for instance, took place through systems of oppression for some, and through the world of Indian classical music for others. The personal journeys of finding identities—still an ongoing process—and seeking out groups where youth felt a sense of belongingness came alive in enlightening ways in this session. A remarkable point about this session was that, despite the heterogeneity in experiences of identity formation, all speakers echoed the need to shift away from homogenizing South Asian identity. For example, it was noted that Punjabi culture seems to have overridden the other narratives of South Asian identity and culture in British Columbia, noted one speaker. An ardent desire to embrace diverse cultures was put forward in the session, as one speaker said that it is truly a privilege growing up in diversity. Therefore, acceptance and celebration of differences and diversity within the South Asian identity was a powerful theme that tied this session beautifully together.

The papers by Aneesha Grewal, Akhil Dattani, and Maisha Haque have all been published in these Proceedings; therefore, we will briefly report on the one by Rina

Pradhan, who talked about Nepali youths' perspectives on how they try to strike a balance between the culture of their origin and that of their adopted country, Canada. In her brief presentation, Rina took a few steps back to trace the reasons her research was born in the first place. During her many visits to Nepali events in Canada, she noticed youngsters being glued to their phones, and she wondered about the reasons behind this mobile addiction. Her research process involved holding consensual focus group discussions divided by age. Major findings that emerged from this research included perceived differences between generations and their degree of involvement in Nepali cultural events. Nepali youths were found to constantly deal with the different expectations and perceptions they have about themselves—emerging both from their country of origin and from their adopted country. This makes finding a balance even more pertinent and difficult. Thus, to help youth in this process, Rina felt that support should be provided by people who have experienced similar cultural duality. Her parting thought was that emphasis also needs to be placed on exploring the parents' perspective regarding the strategies they use in supporting their children through this difficult journey.

## SESSION II: GENDERED VIOLENCE, REPRESENTATION, AND RESISTANCE

This session incorporated some very harsh and hard-hitting realities about the lives of Canadian South Asian youth. Some of the key issues that these youth face—such as sexism, patriarchal norms, toxic masculinity, racism, and even violence—were brought forward, explored, and critiqued at three levels: familial, community level, and institutional/structural. A core point of discussion that emerged from all three presentations was the negligent attitude and role played by Canadian print and other media in constructing, reinforcing, and reproducing stereotypical images of the immigrant community. This media representation comes to play a pivotal role in maintaining intra-community violence experienced by South Asian women because this violence is seen as inherent and thus separate from the larger society. However, all three presenters—Harpreet Kaur Mander, Veronica Sudesh, and Alysha Amrita Baines—spoke in favour of debunking this notion. They pointed out that the concept of hegemonic masculinity is a problem that permeates society as a whole, and therefore gendered violence is not specific to South Asians. By allowing this notion that it is a community-specific problem to continue, the Canadian state converts it into a tool for intervening in this community as the white settler, as one speaker in particular pointed out. Speakers in this commendable session gave voice to issues that remain silenced in the South Asian community and urged that it is high time for everyone to start having open discussions around these topics. Again, we will present here only a brief summary of the presentation by Alysha Amrita Bains, who chose not to submit a complete paper for the Proceedings.

Alysha's presentation, "Dominant Narratives and Sites of Creative Resistance: Reimagining Multicultural Canada through South Asian Youth Communities," started with a difficult and thought-provoking question: how are identities cultivated and what makes us angry? She noted that racism is not merely represented but also gets reproduced through the media and society; our identities are constantly reconstructed

through various forces. Media representation of race and systemic violence is made hyper-visible; for example, Alysha noted that there is a dual image created of immigrants—the good ones vs. the bad ones—so she always grew up with a notion of what she should *not* be. The idea of Canada being multicultural, she pointed out, is often used as an excuse for state intervention and needs to be problematized. According to her, the policy of multiculturalism hides the dark, violent colonial history that Canada is built on. Alysha’s presentation provided a backdrop against which to introduce her research and guide the direction in which she intends to proceed. She would eventually like to discover the resistance tactics and strategies employed by youth to respond to these issues through creative output.

### SESSION III: SEXUALITY, SUBJECTIVITY, AND COMMUNITY RESISTANCE

This session was a true embodiment of individual and collective resistance. Through sharing various examples—whether historical, contemporary, or personal—speakers in this session threw light on the many ways traditional and social orthodoxy is challenged and needs to be challenged on a continuous basis if change is to happen. The session was all about breaking traditional boundaries, issuing challenges, and questioning dominant narratives. Topics around gender non-conformity, sexual desire, and menstruation are still very much taboo even to this day; thus, having presenters speak boldly about these concepts was noteworthy as well as liberating. Most South Asian families are trapped in this traditional mindset of perceiving medicine and engineering as the only legitimate professions or career choices; breaking that box of conformity by choosing to follow one’s passion for social justice and environmental protection is another act of resistance presented in this session. To question and critique the dominant narrative is pivotal because, as this session demonstrated, it is always written, shaped, and controlled by those in power. For example, since phallic symbols rule the historical archive, non-phallic sexuality and desires get sidelined. Similarly, dominant narratives have led to the erasure of the history, language, experiences, and knowledge of Indigenous people, but presenters in this session tried to challenge that by pointing out the wisdom that can be learned from Indigenous communities regarding a multitude of issues, particularly climate change.

Bidushy Rahman’s accounts of polysexuality in South Asia and Leena Hassan’s inner journey into personal and political resistance have been shared in the Proceedings. Taqdir Bhandal bravely opened her presentation, “The Coloniality of Menstruation and Diasporic Subjects,” by sharing with the audience how her writing draws from emergent strategy, radical love, and black feminism. Having established a very peaceful, almost meditative state in the room, Taqdir continued sharing one of her creative projects on menstrual health which came out of a coercive relationship. The recognition that this is still a taboo topic in South Asian Punjabi communities was brought forward, with the speaker emphasizing that the stigma around this subject needs to be broken. “Sikhism” itself celebrates menstrual flow (*Mahvari*), and has four seasons similar to the various stages or phases of the menstrual cycle. Menstruation embodies divine femininity; so “why is there shame and disgust around something so natural?” asked Taqdir. As an example of women’s solidarity, she offered the story of

the women in Kerala, India who in 2019 built a massive human wall to protest menstrual taboo and break patriarchal norms of impurity and restrictions placed on women during menstruation. She also talked about an old *Gurudwara* (Sikh temple) that has initiated a policy of providing free menstrual products and holding workshops to raise awareness around this issue. Toward the end of her presentation, Taqdir poignantly pointed out that while the entire cosmos depends on the process of menstruation, the current practice of Sikhism unfortunately borders on toxic masculinity, which needs to change.

#### SESSION IV: POVERTY, SOCIAL JUSTICE, AND INCLUSION

The presenters in this session explored some interesting key concepts such as the importance of self-reflection, the need for inclusivity, and decolonizing perspectives in activism and social justice work. Constructing an “other” who is perceived as different from or even “inferior” to us is not only easy but also very dangerous. Therefore, the speakers strongly encouraged the dropping of labels and stereotypes and called instead for deconstructing or decolonizing the “other” in order to see them from a humane perspective. Indigenous and racialized populations already face many institutional barriers, hence it is crucial to stress that each person and issue is different; what we need is an acknowledgement and celebration of diversity and differences. The call for social justice was evident in the session, with a focus on building a community of care, inclusion, and acceptance. The Proceedings include three full papers written by three of the four presenters in this last individual paper session: Ishmam Bhuiyan, Rajdeep Dhadwal, and Avanti Haque.

“The Need for a ‘Whole’ Education: Encouraging our Students to Embrace Diversity in the Classroom” was the title of Sonali Johal’s presentation. Sonali has been a primary school teacher in Canada and the theoretical background on which her work draws is John Dewey’s theory for societal change makers. She began her talk by emphasizing the value of imparting content-based education to children, while highlighting that it is also important to help them express themselves, teach them that their voices are valued, and make sure that they grow mentally, socially, and emotionally. For that purpose, she argued that it is important to move beyond the tolerance model of diversity to that of acceptance. Her philosophy of comfort and openness between student and teacher comes from her own personal experience of being shy and not speaking up in class due to factors such as ethnicity, race, class, and gender. This type of dynamic is not conducive to a child’s growth. Thus, she reinforced the idea of broadening school curriculum, and went on to talk about how she tries to come up with creative, class-based projects which help build solidarity and community among students. By sharing her own life story with students she regularly encourages them to speak up and share their personal stories. She ensures that the differences among us and the diversity that exists all around us are highlighted and recognized—and more importantly, accepted and celebrated. For example, she brings in diverse literature and sets up a reflective photo booth to build a sense of community in her class. In the end, Sonali appreciated that teachers in British Columbia now have access to a revised curriculum which allows more freedom to incorporate all these important values.

## PANEL PRESENTATION: AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC REFLECTIONS OF FEMINIST SOUTH ASIAN YOUTH

This last session highlighted extremely powerful accounts of the personal journeys of self-discovery of two incredibly strong young women. In describing the painful path of finding their identities, the young presenters poured their hearts out, sharing the struggles they encountered and the pain and loss they faced. It is not easy to bare one's soul and share intimate thoughts, emotions, and lived experiences in front of a large audience; it takes courage to surrender and feel vulnerable in a public space. It is this courageous storytelling that made this panel so potent. This was, to some extent, overwhelming, as a good number of the audience members (this report's writers included) became completely engrossed in these young women's life stories and lived experiences. For these women themselves, the autoethnographic process would have involved navigating through a lot of emotions—a process which in itself is an act of resistance. Thus, an overpowering theme that emerged from this session is resilience—the courage, strength, and ability women demonstrate to survive and stand tall amidst chaos.

As the organizer and moderator of this panel, Rebecca Yoshizawa briefed the audience about the concept of autoethnography, which she described as a method of discovering “who I am in this world.” She also gratefully acknowledged that the two panelists, her students, provided a chance for her to learn about phenomena, insights, and experiences to which she would not otherwise have had access. The reader will have an opportunity to experience the rich narrative of Amrit Dhillon, the first panelist, who evoked the strong feminist within herself and advocated for an intersectionality framework as an analytical tool to understand the challenges and experiences of racialized and Indigenous women. Therefore, we will present highlights here of the autoethnographic presentation by Navi Rai, the second panelist and final speaker of the conference.

Navi Rai started the presentation by sharing a beautiful poem she wrote about feelings of going back home to Punjab. She was born there and immigrated to Canada at a very young age. She hinted at the constant tug of war, negotiation, and split between her various identities, and the harrowing feeling of encountering an incomplete sense of identity. This forced her to examine her relationship with her own existence in a completely new light. At this point, she stated that being in Rebecca's class on autoethnography had totally changed her perspective. According to her nuanced narratives, the three words *Punjab*, *partition*, and *placenta* all are connected because each denotes traumas and loss of life that many people including her have faced. Partition was a terrifying experience for the people in Punjab; it had an immense impact on their lives, and remnants of this experience still remain in their bodies. Thus, the trauma has been internalized by many of them. Partition, Navi stressed, is an irreplaceable loss; Punjabi women feel that void even today, and experience suffering every day. Navi noted the fact that these traumatic memories have been passed down inter-generationally and get carried to the western world too. She then shared another poem which she had written about placentas, going on to explain that placenta is an essential part of oneself. She narrated how she became obsessed with this idea and

soon found out that her own placenta was buried in her courtyard in Punjab, India. A fascinating point noted by Navi was that pregnancy is an intergenerationally connected phenomenon—pregnant women are affected by the things their mothers and grandmothers were affected by. Navi’s parting thoughts were that her placenta prepared her for the western world, giving her the strength derived from all the mothers and grandmothers before her—the generations who survived all the hardships and suffering.

#### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

As the last session brought an end to this eventful conference, the organizers thanked all the participants, sponsors, and audience members for coming and supporting the presenters and being a part of this event. Everyone gathered around to interact and engage with each other’s presentation topics and research work. The conference saw a vast number of participants and attendees; but more than this large turnout, it was the quality and depth of discussions generated by the presentations that made this conference a tremendous success. There was time allocated for questions and answers at the end of the presentations in each session. The audience and other participants enthusiastically took advantage of this time to further engage with the speakers and their presentations.

The conference provided youth with a platform to share their experience and research with the larger academic community as well as the South Asian community. One recurring idea that evolved during the conference was that we as a community need to take the first step to initiate dialogue and discussion around the many critical issues faced by our youth and future generations. Another emergent idea also became apparent—namely, that many South Asian Canadian youths are open to troubling and critically examining the vexing relationships between immigrant communities and Indigenous nations. The fact that the conference and exchange of knowledge took place on the indigenous lands was reiterated by a number of speakers as well as the organizers. Such acknowledgement and examination lie at the heart of social justice work and is vital for problematizing South Asians as a homogenous category, as the keynote speaker also suggested. Instead of sweeping things under the rug, it is better to deal with these issues head on and in a collaborative way.

The conference organizers deserve appreciation and applause for organizing such an important forum for youth with a common interest and for research on South Asian diasporic issues, identities, processes, and activism in Canada. According to the organizers, this was inspired by the Canada 150 Conference on Migration of Bengalis, the first one of its kind, held in September 2017. Thus, we are curious what this groundbreaking conference will stimulate or lead to; we definitely hope to see more events and gatherings of such kind every year or two.