

Beyond Bollywood: Indian Americans Shape the Nation.* National Museum of Natural History, Washington, DC. February 24, 2014-August 16, 2015.

Reviewed by Jessica Jain

Beyond Bollywood: Indian Americans Shape the Nation puts the spotlight on the Indian American community and showcases its history and contributions beyond what is portrayed in Bollywood, the mainstream Hindi film industry. The exhibit opened the dialogue in the nation's capital at the National Museum of Natural History on February 27, 2014, where it remained until August 16, 2015. *Beyond Bollywood* aims to dismantle stereotypes, juxtaposing prominent symbols of those stereotypes against statistics, archival materials, and personal testimonies. With virtually no objects in the Smithsonian collection that represented Indian Americans, curator Masum Momaya called upon Indian Americans across the nation to contribute their photos, artifacts, and stories to the exhibit. These crowdsourced objects featured in the physical and digital versions of the exhibit offer a more personal connection with the actual experiences of Indian Americans. The entrance to the Smithsonian installation was lined with shoes, including fancy beaded *chappals* (sandals), welcoming visitors into the exhibition as if one were entering the home of an Indian American family. This reference to the Asian tradition of leaving the physical dirt from the outside world at the door is in line with the exhibit's attempt to leave the figurative dirt from mass media stereotypes behind and to enter into the real lives of Indian Americans. While the initial installation of *Beyond Bollywood* is a great start to the conversation about the overall impact of Indian Americans in American society, it will be interesting to see how the Indian American community is defined and celebrated locally as it travels to institutions across the nation.

Nostalgia for the Indian homeland was evoked through sight and sound. The walls were splashed with bright yellow and magenta. The soft, high-pitched notes of popular Hindi playback singer Lata Mangeshkar echoed throughout the space—"Pyaar Kiya to Darna Kya"—connecting visitors to the opulence and romantic spectacle of Bollywood in classic films such as *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960). "Jeena Yahan, Marna Yahan" from legendary Bollywood actor, producer, and director Raj Kapoor's semi-autobiographical film *Mera Naam Joker* (1970), played next. While the words "Jeena yahan, marna yahan, iske siva jaana kahan?" (Live here, die here, where else to go?) described the showman firmly rooted to his life on stage, an open trunk provoked visitors to think about uprooting one's life and starting anew in a foreign land. This open trunk filled with personal items gave visitors an example of what a (Hindu) Indian may have brought when relocating abroad. Maps showed the current distribution of Indian communities across the nation alongside crowdsourced family photos of Indian Americans, including a photo of the curator's father, Hemendra Momaya, departing Mumbai in 1965 for America in a business suit and tie with auspicious garlands around his neck and a packed bag in his hand. Visitors were then presented with newspaper articles relating the history of Indian immigration to America, as well as some of the struggles Indian immigrants faced when settling in the United States and obtaining the right to citizenship.

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As visitors advanced through the exhibit, contemporary struggles that Indian Americans continue to face, including sartorial stereotypes, were highlighted. For example, selections from artist Annu Matthew's "An Indian from India" collection of portraits addressed past and present stereotypes of the "Indian" Other. In this portfolio, Matthew paired self-portraits in Indian dress mimicking the backdrop and poses of staged photographs of 19th and early 20th century Native Americans to challenge these stereotypes (e.g. not really American, but Indian American; not "feather" Indian, but "dot" Indian). *Beyond Bollywood* showed how such stereotypes can lead to feelings of alienation and even violent persecution if not dismantled. The exhibit also discussed two sartorial stereotypes that have been targeted: the *bindi* and the turban. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, an anti-Indian hate group in New Jersey called themselves the Dotbusters, referencing the bindi or "dot" traditionally worn on the forehead between the eyebrows by Hindu women. The exhibit also displayed a turban of Balbir Singh Sodhi, a Sikh man and the first South Asian to be murdered in retaliation for the attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001. Sodhi's turban was presented as both an example of Sikh religious headwear and of the dangers of racial profiling and persecution.

The next section of the exhibit focused on the stereotypes and statistics of the four vocations most commonly associated with Indian Americans in popular culture—doctor, taxi driver, hotel owner, and engineer. This section featured the first doctor bag of Abraham Verghese, video clips from interviews with Sikh taxi drivers in Liam Dalzell's 2004 documentary *Punjabi Cab*, and a life-sized hotel lobby recreation inspired by Chiraag Bhakta and Mark Hewko's "The Arch Motel Project," a photographic tour of hotels owned by Gujarati-Americans across the nation. Visitors experienced the hotel lobby from behind the counter, flanked by hanging room keys, business supplies (telephone, calculator), personal artifacts (cassette tapes, lunch tiffin), and religious (Hindu) imagery. Peering through the window into the lobby, visitors could see the Americana imagery and artifacts prominently displayed in the lobby.

Indian American artists and activists were featured in the next section. Their work tackled social issues in the Indian American community, including work visas (Ruee Gawarikar's painting "The Goddess of Visas" depicted the anxiety and red tape involved in applying for US work visas with an intense "humorous" depiction of a multi-limbed Hindu goddess), marriage (Anjali Bhargava and Swati Khurana's *Unsuitable Girls* series), LGBT rights (the South Asian Lesbian and Gay Association fighting for inclusion in New York's India Day Parade), and acceptance in mainstream America (DJ Rekha, for example, is credited with popularizing *bhangra*, Punjabi folk music, with her monthly "Basement Bhangra" event starting in 1997).

Indian Americans whose achievements were groundbreaking or gained them celebrity status were highlighted in a long row of portraits framed in *thaalis* (round stainless steel, eared rimmed food platters) hung on the exhibit wall. The space above the celebrity thaalis was filled with inspirational quotes from select celebrities. Symbols of select achievements—such as the dress Naeem Khan designed for First Lady Michelle Obama to wear to the 2012 National Governors Association Dinner, the silver medal Mohini Bhardwaj won in gymnastics during the 2004 Olympics, and boxes of methotrexate, the cancer treatment biochemist Yellapragada Subbarao developed—were positioned next to their thaalis. This section of the exhibited features two popular "selfie" sites: a life-sized portrait of Nina Davuluri shortly after she had been crowned (the first Indian American) Miss America in 2013 and a recreation of a spelling bee stage with

the National Spelling Bee trophy won by (the first Indian American) Balu Natarajan in 1985. The outer corridor between the exhibit's two entrances was another "selfie" site. Visitors could pose next to life-sized portraits of costumed dancers in positions characteristic of popular, classic, and folk dances (e.g. Bollywood, *Kuchipudi*, *Kathak*, *Odissi*, *Bharatnatyan*, *Bhangra*, and *Rass*).

Food and spirituality were presented in the next section of the exhibit. A long dining room table set with American style plates on one side and Indian *thalis* on the other invites visitors to the center of the room to learn how Indian cuisine and cutlery have adapted in the American context. A large mirrored octagon beckoned visitors to try basic *asanas* (positions) inside and learn how yoga has evolved in the American context. Although the exhibit until this point was dominated by Hindu and Sikh imagery, one wall is devoted to the religious diversity of the Indian American community. The wall features quotes from practitioners of these faiths (Baha'ists, Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Jains, Jews, Muslims, Sikhs, Zoroastrians) across the nation and featured a slideshow of images from select religious functions of each faith.

Telling the story of Indian Americans is no easy task. India is home to multiple, diverse regional cultures with their own languages, cuisines, and clothing styles that preexist contemporary national boundaries. Despite this diversity, contemporary Indian national imagery is still overwhelmingly North Indian and Hindu-centric. *Beyond Bollywood* acknowledged the greater *Desi* (i.e. South Asian) community on one exhibit panel and attempted to represent Indian Americans from other regions and religions of the Indian subcontinent, but it largely remained within the boundaries of the political definition of the Indian community. Nevertheless, Momaya curated an excellent springboard for dialogue about Indian American experiences in and contributions to American society. The travelling version of the exhibit made its first stop at the Morris Museum in Morristown, New Jersey in May 2015 and continues to bring the dialogue to institutions across the nation. Including the core panels, charts, and graphics, as well as the wall *thalis*, trunk, and audio station, the travelling exhibit offers a flexible framework for host institutions to build onto the conversation and showcase the particular history and impact of their local Indian American communities. Hopefully, some host institutions will go even further beyond *Beyond Bollywood* to celebrate how *Desi* Americans shape the nation.

Jessica Jain holds an MA in Folklore from Indiana University, Bloomington. Her studies focused on material culture and South Asian body art, particularly mehendi (henna) in northern India. She currently works as Membership Manager for Tennessee Craft in Nashville.

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