

South Asians in Canada: Unity through diversity

by Kelly Tran, Jennifer Kaddatz and Paul Allard

Numbering 917,000 in 2001, South Asians were the second largest visible minority group in Canada, just behind the Chinese at slightly over one million people. The South Asian community is one of the most diverse visible minority groups, consisting of a range of ethnic, religious and linguistic groups whose ancestries, immigration histories and personal experiences are quite varied. And yet, the South Asian community is one of the most unified when it comes to the value they attach to family interaction, the maintenance of social networks within their cultural group, and the preservation of ethnic customs, traditions and heritage languages.

Using data from the 2002 Ethnic Diversity Survey (EDS) and the 2001 Census of Population, this article examines the diversity of the South Asian population in Canada, traces their history in this country and looks at how their ethnic and cultural backgrounds are reflected in their everyday lives.

CST What you should know about this study

The Ethnic Diversity Survey (EDS) was developed by Statistics Canada, in partnership with the Department of Canadian Heritage, to provide information on the ethnic and cultural backgrounds of people in Canada and how these backgrounds relate to their lives today. The survey was conducted by telephone between April and August 2002 and included about 42,500 respondents aged 15 years and over living in private households in the 10 provinces. Persons living on Indian reserves and those of Aboriginal origins living off-reserve were not included in the survey.

The 2001 Census of Population provides data on the demographic profile of the population, including the respondent's visible minority group, country of birth, the country of birth of their parents, landed immigrant status, time of landing in Canada, language and religion. Census data refer to the total population.

The roots of South Asian settlement in Canada

Growth and diversity within the South Asian population in Canada are in part the result of centuries of migration from the Indian sub-continent. Many South Asians can trace their lineage back to India and other parts of Southern Asia, but have

family members who have settled in all parts of the world. As early as the mid-1800s, indentured labourers from India went to Fiji, Mauritius, South Africa and the Caribbean to work in agriculture. Many remained in their new lands.¹

About 100 years ago, between 1905 and 1908, some 5,000 South Asians

CST Who is a South Asian?

A South Asian (sometimes referred to as East Indian in Canada and Asian Indian in the United States) may be defined as any person who reports an ethnicity associated with the southern part of Asia or who self-identifies as part of the South Asian visible minority group. This definition encompasses people from a great diversity of ethnic backgrounds, including those with Bangladeshi, Bengali, East Indian, Goan, Gujarati, Hindu, Ismaili, Kashmiri, Nepali, Pakistani, Punjabi, Sikh, Sinhalese, South Asian, Sri Lankan and Tamil ancestry. South Asians may have been born in Canada, on the Indian sub-continent, in the Caribbean, in Africa, in Great Britain or elsewhere.

Thus, the South Asian group could have been defined using a number of indicators such as visible minority status, ethnic or cultural ancestry, place of birth and/or place of birth of parents. This article mainly uses the visible minority variable from the Ethnic Diversity Survey and Census to describe the South Asian visible minority population. The visible minority variable includes respondents who self-identified as South Asian as well as those who self-identified as both South Asian and White. It does not include those who self-identified as South Asian and another visible minority group (e.g. Black, Chinese, Filipino, Latin American, Southeast Asian, Arab, West Asian, Korean, Japanese, etc.). According to the 2001 Census, the vast majority of people in the South Asian visible minority group also reported at least one South Asian ethnic origin.

arrived in British Columbia, lured by economic prospects and the beauty of the land.² The predominantly male population, mostly Punjabi Sikhs, worked mainly in railroad construction and in the logging and lumber industries.³

The South Asian community in Canada remained relatively small and homogenous throughout the early 1900s because of restrictive immigration laws prohibiting Asian and Indian immigration.⁴ As the social climate changed, immigration regulations slowly changed with them. By the 1960s and 1970s, employment skills, education and language ability were the criteria used to select immigrants rather than race or country of origin.

South Asian community grows and diversifies

Over the years, the South Asian community in Canada has evolved from a relatively small and homogenous population to one that is unique in its diversity, boasting a multitude of different birthplace origins, ethnicities, religions and languages. The number of South Asians in Canada more than tripled from 223,000 in 1981 to 917,000 in 2001, mainly due to a large number of immigrants from Southern Asia.⁵

At the time of the 2001 Census, 29% of South Asians living in Canada had been born here, 69% were immigrants and 2% were non-permanent residents.⁶ Some 76% of immigrants were born in Southern Asia, with India (47%), Sri Lanka (13%) and Pakistan (12%) being the

top three places of birth. Of the remaining immigrants who identified themselves as South Asian most came from Tanzania, Kenya, Guyana, Fiji, Trinidad and Tobago, and the United Kingdom.

South Asians have settled in different parts of this country, although the lion's share (70%) called either Toronto or Vancouver home.

In 2001, South Asians accounted for 10% of the population of Toronto (making up the largest visible minority group in that census metropolitan area) and 8% of Vancouver. However, the highest proportion of South Asians in any census metropolitan area lived in Abbotsford, British Columbia at 13% (almost three-quarters of the visible minority population in Abbotsford were South Asian).

South Asians maintain close ties with their birth country

Given their relatively recent arrival in Canada, it is perhaps not surprising that most South Asians still have close ties with their country of origin. Some 66% of South Asian immigrants (78% of those from India, 89%^E from Fiji, and 96%^E from Trinidad and Tobago) reported having visited their country of birth at least once since arriving in Canada.

Furthermore, the vast majority of South Asians, even those who were born in Canada, appear to maintain contact with overseas family members through visits, telephone calls, letters and e-mail. In 2002, 86% reported having had, during the previous 12 months, some type of contact with family living in their own birth country or the birthplace of their parents or grandparents, with 56% keeping in touch at least once a month.

Generations in Canada separate family members by time as well as distance. The proportion of South Asians who reported keeping in touch with family members in their countries of origin dropped from 88% of first generation to 75% of second generation individuals. In comparison, 86% of all immigrants in

	All South Asian immigrants	1991-2001	1981-1990	1971-1980	Before 1971
All countries	633,000	337,000	138,000	123,000	36,000
	%				
India	47.3	44.9	47.2	49.5	61.8
Sri Lanka	13.4	18.2	14.9	2.0	2.3
Pakistan	11.8	16.2	6.0	7.5	7.0
Guyana	4.7	2.7	7.8	6.6	4.2
Bangladesh	3.2	4.9	1.9	0.6	0.6
Fiji	3.2	2.2	3.9	5.0	4.4
United Republic of Tanzania	2.7	0.7	3.4	8.1	1.3
Kenya	2.4	0.8	3.7	5.4	2.4
Trinidad and Tobago	2.1	1.2	2.1	2.8	7.6
United Kingdom	1.9	1.1	2.7	2.8	2.5
Uganda	1.3	0.2	0.7	5.3	0.8
All other countries	6.0	6.7	5.8	4.4	5.1

Source: Statistics Canada, Censuses of Population.

in Canada, 38%^E of individuals who worked in the year prior to the EDS reported that half of their co-workers had Punjabi ancestral origins as well.

South Asians are the least likely of all visible minority groups to marry someone outside their population group. Of the 232,010 married and common-law couples that included at least one South Asian partner in 2001, about 13% were mixed unions: 9% between a South Asian and someone not in a visible minority group and 3% between a South Asian and a person in another visible minority group. In contrast, according to the 2001 Census, the proportion of mixed unions was 16% among couples with at least one Chinese partner and 43% among those with at least one Black partner.

Linguistic diversity is prominent among South Asians

According to the 2001 Census, members of the South Asian community reported more than 75 different mother tongues.⁸ Among those with just one mother tongue, Punjabi was the most common first language (29%), followed by English (27%), Tamil (10%), Urdu (8%), Gujarati (6%), Hindi (6%) and Bengali (3%).

As expected, South Asians who were born outside Canada were very likely to have a language other than, or in addition to, English or French as their mother tongue (80%). More surprisingly, though, nearly half (45%) of Canadian-born South Asians with at least one foreign-born parent, and 13% with two Canadian-born parents, also first learned to speak a language other than, or as well as, English or French when they were growing up.

The transfer of language between parents and children suggests the maintenance of strong cultural ties. When asked in the EDS how important it was to them that their child⁹ learn to speak their own first language, 58% of South Asian parents responded that it was important. In comparison, 38% of Chinese respondents felt this way.

Canada had contact with family from their countries of origin. This drops to 56% among second generation Canadians.

Families have a strong presence

The level of contact South Asians maintain with relatives in their birth countries is mirrored in the fact that the vast majority (93%) report a strong sense of belonging to their family. Indeed, 95% of South Asians live in family households of parents, children, spouses or other relatives, compared with 87% of the total Canadian population.

The importance of family is also reflected in the living arrangements of elderly parents. South Asian seniors aged 65 and over lived in predominantly family-oriented households: 66% with their spouse, 25% with other family members and just 8% alone. In comparison, 11% of Chinese seniors and 29% of all seniors in Canada lived on their own.

Local social networks continue to play a crucial role

In addition to valuing their family networks, South Asians also attach

a great deal of importance to their ethno-cultural community in Canada, which has provided them with invaluable assistance over the years. Many of the earliest immigrants faced economic hardship, discrimination, and loneliness and looked to the South Asian community in Canada for support. The community, in turn, worked together to provide food, housing, jobs, financial support and, of course, friendship ties.⁷ The bond forged in those early days appears to have continued to the present.

Social networks are often drawn from the particular ethnic community of the individual. Indeed, many South Asians tend to both socialize and work with members of their own ethnic group. For example, 83% of those with Punjabi ancestry reported that at least half their friends also had Punjabi ancestry. A similar proportion of those with Tamil ancestry stated that at least half of their friends had Tamil ancestry.

Strong social networks also play a role in the labour market as they can provide links to jobs. Among those with Punjabi ancestry, for example, a group with a long settlement history

On the other hand, many South Asians who first learned a heritage language now use English at home,¹⁰ either as their only language (29%) or in addition to a heritage language (40%), indicating that the use of English clearly becomes prominent over time. In addition, data from the 2002 EDS show that nearly 7 in 10 (69%) South Asians converse with their friends most often in English. This compares with just over half of Chinese individuals and nearly three-quarters of Blacks.

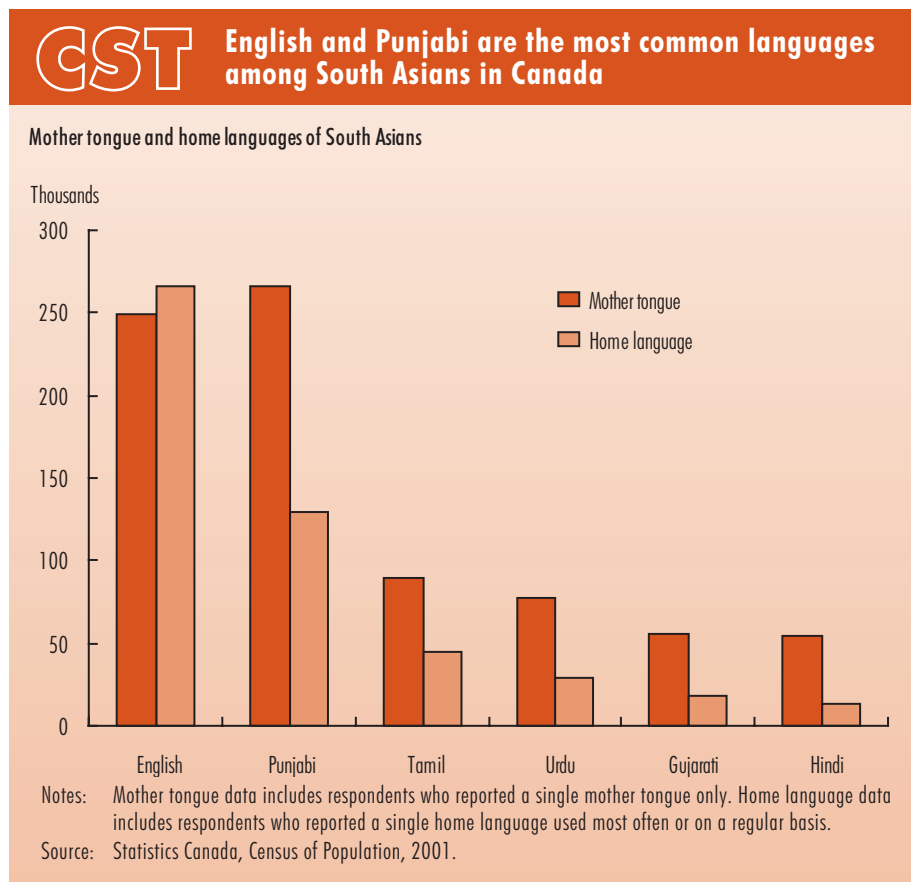
Customs and traditions highly valued

As with their linguistic traditions, South Asians in Canada tend to attach a strong sense of importance to their ethnic customs and traditions, such as holidays and celebrations, food, clothing and art. More than 8 in 10 said, when asked in the 2002 EDS, that they considered maintaining such traditions important or very important. In comparison, about 67% of Chinese, 70% of Blacks and 60% of individuals who were not in a visible minority group placed this same value on their cultural practises.

The importance of maintaining ethnic customs and traditions did not appear to diminish with time spent in Canada. The proportion of South Asian immigrants who had arrived in Canada between 1991 and 2001, and who felt that keeping their cultural heritage alive was important (84%) was comparable to that of second-generation South Asians, at 80%. In contrast, the proportion of individuals who felt this way was lower among second generation Blacks (63%) but comparable to South Asians among the Chinese.

Religion plays an important part in South Asian culture

Religion, another aspect of diversity, adds vibrancy to the South Asian cultural mosaic in Canada. The roots of Buddhism, Sikhism and Hinduism can be traced to the Indian sub-continent, and Southern Asia is also home to large Muslim and Christian



groups. Many South Asian immigrants have brought their religions to Canada with them: in 2001, some 30% of South Asians said that they were Sikh, 28% Hindu, 23% Muslim, 8% Catholic, 7% another religion and 3% reported having no religion.

South Asians of different religions tend to settle in different parts of Canada, perhaps reflecting early settlement patterns and the existence of established locations for religious worship and celebration. For example, 9 in 10 South Asians in Abbotsford are Sikh, compared with 6 in 10 in Vancouver and Victoria. In contrast, in Toronto more than one-third of South Asians reported being Hindu and over one-quarter Muslim.

Religious affiliation was associated with specific ethnic origins. For example, while those with Punjabi ancestry were predominantly Sikh (86%), the majority of individuals reporting Pakistani (90%), Bangladeshi (87%) and Bengali (74%) ethnic origins

were Muslim. Most people with Tamil and Sri Lankan ethnic origins were Hindu: 80% and 64%, respectively.

Despite the fact that South Asians differ considerably in terms of their religious affiliation, as a whole, this group is unified in attaching a strong sense of importance to their religion. According to data from the 2002 EDS, 83% of South Asians said that their religion was important or very important to them compared with a similar proportion of Chinese, 53% of all Canadians and 78% of Blacks. The importance of religion was maintained by second generation South Asians, 76% of whom said that their religion was important to them, compared with 55% of all second generation Canadians.

South Asians were also likely to actively participate in religious activities. Virtually all South Asians who reported a religion in the EDS had participated in such activities in the 12 months prior to the survey

either on their own or with others (97%). This compares with 87% for the total Canadian population, 91% for Chinese and 95% for Blacks.

Strong sense of belonging to both ethnic group and Canada

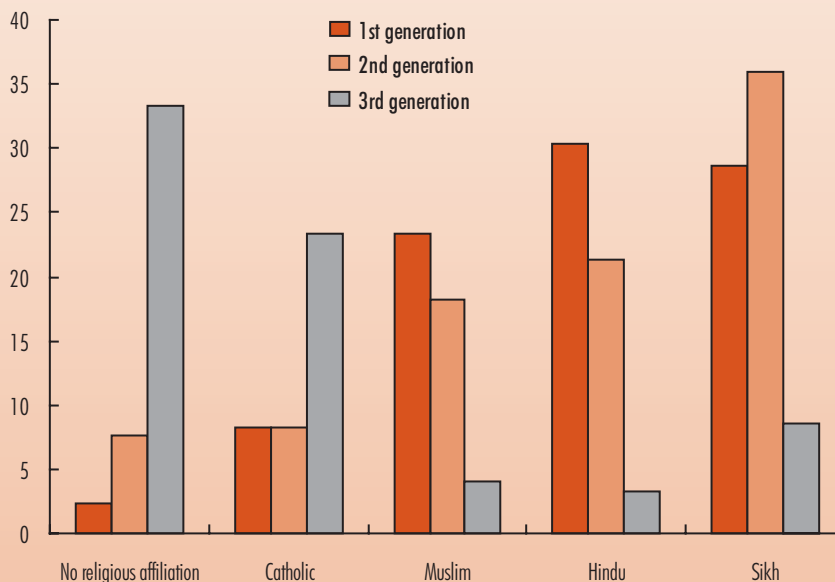
Considering their participation in religious activities, use of heritage languages, maintenance of customs and traditions, and attachment to family and social networks, it is not surprising that in 2002, the majority of South Asians (69%) felt a strong or very strong sense of belonging to their ethnic or cultural group. In comparison, a similar proportion of Chinese, 48% of people not in a visible minority group, and 72% of Blacks professed feeling the same way about their own ethnic or cultural group.

Nevertheless, most South Asians also report a strong sense of belonging to Canada, their province and municipality. In fact, no other visible minority group felt as strongly about belonging to Canada as did South Asians. Almost 9 in 10 (88%) indicated a strong or very strong sense of belonging to Canada, compared with 83% of Blacks, 77% of Chinese and 80% of people who were not in a visible minority group. South Asians were also more likely than other Canadians to report a strong or very strong sense of belonging to their province (74%) and town, city or municipality (70%).

South Asians also tend to participate in local group activities and organizations. According to the EDS, 39% of South Asians were involved in sports teams, hobby clubs, community organizations and other such activities in 2002. This is similar to involvement among the Chinese (36%), while Blacks (46%) and individuals who were not visible minorities (47%) were more likely to participate, perhaps because on average these groups have been in Canada longer than many others, including South Asians. And, as all newcomers know, settling into life in a new country can take some time.

GST Sikhism, Hinduism and Islam were the top three religions among South Asians

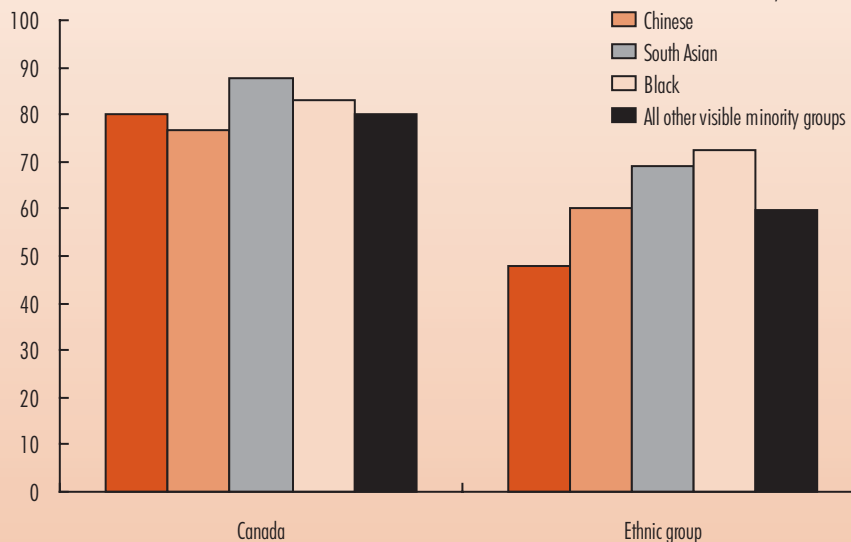
% of South Asians reporting selected religions



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2001.

GST Sense of belonging to Canada and ethnic group is high among South Asians

% who indicated a strong sense of belonging to...



Note: The category "other visible minority groups" includes Arabs, West Asians, Southeast Asians, Latin Americans, Japanese, Koreans, Pacific Islanders and persons belonging to more than one visible minority group. All percentages included in this table are based on the percentage of total valid responses for the non-Aboriginal population aged 15 and over in each group. The difference between South Asian and Chinese figures is not statistically significant.


Source: Statistics Canada, Ethnic Diversity Survey, 2002.

South Asian participation in Canadian civic life, which may require fewer resources in terms of time and money for new immigrants, was even more active. In fact, about 79% of South Asians who were eligible to vote did so in at least one of the last federal, provincial and/or municipal elections, compared with 70% of Chinese, 73% of Blacks and 85% of persons who were not in a visible minority group.

Summary

Drawn to this country for its beauty and prosperity, the South Asian settlement in Canada started with humble beginnings. Today, South Asians are the second largest, and one of the fastest growing, visible minority groups in Canada.

Despite their different backgrounds, South Asians in Canada have built a cultural bridge that links them together. Many also maintain ties with relatives in their birth country, place a high value on ethnic, cultural and religious traditions, and pass on their linguistic heritage. In addition, the South Asian population has adapted to life in Canada and embraced it culturally, socially, economically and linguistically. South Asians continue to weave a rich tapestry of diversity in their new land, and many are proud to call Canada their home.



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E Use with caution.

1. Buchignani, N., D. Indra and R. Srivastava. 1985. *Continuous Journey: A Social History of South Asians in Canada*. McClelland and Stewart: Toronto, Ontario. p. 124-125.
2. Burnet, J.R. and H. Palmer. 1988. *Coming Canadians: An Introduction to a History of Canada's People*. McClelland and Stewart: Toronto, Ontario. p. 31.
3. Buchignani et al. 1985. p. 11.
4. The "continuous journey regulation," which came into effect in 1908, required all potential immigrants to travel by continuous passage from their country of origin directly to Canada. Because no shipping company provided direct service from India to Canada at the time, this regulation essentially closed the door to immigration from South Asia in the beginning of the 20th century.
5. If current trends in immigration and fertility continue, by 2017, South Asians could become the largest visible minority group in Canada, reaching over 1.8 million people. Belanger, A. and É. Caron Malenfant. March 2005. *Population Projections of Visible Minority Groups, Canada, Provinces and Regions, 2001-2017* (Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 91-541).
6. Non-permanent residents are people from another country who had an employment authorization, a student authorization, or a Minister's permit, or who were refugee claimants at the time of the census, and family members living here with them.
7. Buchignani et al. 1985. p. 20.
8. In the census, mother tongue is defined as the language first learned at home and still understood at the time of the census.
9. The EDS asked respondents for information about their youngest child, living in the same household, who was between the ages of 3 and 15.
10. Either most often or on a regular basis.