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Version 4.0 May **Everyday Heroes: South Asians Take Action**
 Features **to Fight Youth Discrimination**

by Sandhya Nankani

Sat. April 17, Jamaica, NY --- Ramesh James is a tall, long haired, bearded, man of West Indian descent. As he laughingly tells his audience that he is often mistaken for a terrorist, he stands straight and proud, looking much older than his 23 years.

Today, he shares the stage with three other members of the South Asian community as he discusses the realities of discrimination against South Asian immigrant youth in New York. His monologue is part of a day-long conference, Myths and Realities: The Many Faces of South Asian Immigrant Youth, at St. John's University in Jamaica, New York, jointly sponsored with a Queens-based organization, South Asian Youth Action (SAYA!).

"What word comes to your mind when you hear the word, criminal?" Ramesh James asks the South Asian high school students, community members, scholars, activists, and social service representatives seated in the auditorium.

"Guns, thief! " A group of thin, eager boys in the front row of the audience pipe up. "What about the word, gang?" "Kryps, Bloods!" they respond. "And, guns?" "Shoot, kill, criminal!" they shout.

Ramesh James edges closer to the podium. "Think again," he says. "I am all of those labels."

South Asian youths are victims of hate crimes

It is a fact that today, South Asian youth, like other recent immigrant groups in the U.S., face discrimination on the basis of their color, religion, accent, and dress. Many of us are familiar with

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the Dot Busters cases of the early 1990's. Last fall, the New York media also focused on the case of Rishi Maharaj, a young man who was brutally beaten while walking home from school in his own Queens neighborhood.

Maharaj's case was not an isolated incident of racially motivated attacks. Just recently in South Ozone Park, Queens, an eighth-grade Indo-Guyanese student was beaten up outside her school; her earring was ripped out of her ear. And, eight years ago, when he was 15 years old, Ramesh James was walking home in the Bronx when he was attacked by two Latino men.

However, James' story did not end like Rishi Maharaj's. He pulled out a gun and shot, killing one of his perpetrators. Arrested and accused of manslaughter, he was sentenced to six years in jail, serving time both on Riker's Island jail and in a high security prison in upstate New York.

James is aware of the differences between his case and that of Rishi Maharaj. He speaks poignantly of his years in prison, of his experience with the racist system, and of the lack of support that he received from the South Asian community for a crime committed in self-defense.

"If we don't start taking charge of our own," he continues, "We might as well let them go"

He shows his audience the three things that he always carries around with him. They are not a driver's license, a high school ring, or a college ID card - objects that commonly represent adolescent nostalgia and attachment. Instead he pulls down the neck of his sweater to show a ring around his throat. "This is the mark from where I tried to hang myself," he says. He pushes up the sleeve of his left arm. "This is the mark from where I tried to slit my wrist." He points to his back. "Here are slash marks from where I was attacked while I was in jail."

Today, James is a member of the South Bronx Youth Force, an agency that helps juveniles who are arrested to assert their rights, protect themselves and navigate the "system." His agency pulls juvenile "criminals" out of the system and takes them to community building organizations that can rebuild their self-esteem and their lives. James wants to give back to his community and protect young men from the experiences he has had.

"We never hear the statistics about South Asian youth offenders,

but that doesn't mean they do not exist," says James. "At Riker's Island there is a cell block reserved just for South Asian because they are perceived as reckless."

"If we don't start taking charge of our own," he continues, "We might as well let them go."

Asserting individual and community rights

Another panelist, Tito Sinha agrees with James. He is a Staff Attorney at the Asian American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (AALDEF), the legal representative for the family of Rishi Maharaj.

"Rishi's was not an isolated incident," Mr. Sinha points out. "Therefore, it is important that we as a community responded to this event and that we learn how to work with other communities to ensure that this sort of violence does not take place again."

On the practical side, Sinha advises South Asian youth and their families of the steps they must take to protect themselves once they become victims of a racially motivated attack: Go to the police. Report the event and tell them it is a hate crime. Go to agencies like AALDEF and the New York State Commission on Human Rights for legal aid and advice. Share stories of victimization and empowerment with your family, friends, and in town-hall style community meetings.

Sinha emphasizes the importance of community mobilizing, coalition building, and grassroots activism within the South Asian community. For all this, he looks to South Asian youth -- and in particular, members of SAYA! sitting in the audience -- for leadership initiative.

SAYA! is the only organization of its kind in the United States. Founded in 1996 by Sayu Bhojwani, it serves youths aged 11-19 from South Asia, providing them with a linguistically and culturally specific support system. In recent years, SAYA! has begun to play a key role in providing opportunities for growth and development in young South Asians while instilling in them cultural, social and political awareness.

"We have trained our children not to be violent," Jamoona says. "So, when they are being beaten, they just stand there and take the blows."

Chan Jamoona, another member of this panel discussion on discrimination, also sees SAYA! as a "light in the tunnel." A Registered Nurse and exemplary community activist, she discusses the importance of galvanizing the community to confront the issue of discrimination, harassment and physical violence against young South Asians.

Jamoona recounts incidents that have taken place in her community - a young girl dragged by her long braid, a young woman slashed on her chest at school, kids' faces rubbed in concrete.

"We have trained our children not to be violent," Jamoona says. "So, when they are being beaten, they just stand there and take the blows." Despite this, Jamoona refuses to advocate violence as a means of self-protection. Instead, she believes that community solutions can improve these delicate situations.

Tips on community empowerment

She offers several tested and tried suggestions for community empowerment. First, report all incidents of violence and harassment to the authorities, no matter how small. When Jamoona's teenage daughter, Vidya was in her first semester of eighth grade, 30 of her South Asian classmates were physically assaulted in school. Jamoona was horrified to find out that none of these students' parents had reported these incidents to authorities. She asked Vidya to bring her a list of the victims, along with their addresses and phone numbers. Then, she went door to door meeting each of the children's parents and asking them to file a complaint with the police.

Second, Jamoona advocates reaching out to the police. After gathering the support of the parents of her daughter's classmates, she met with the Police Captain to make him aware of the problem. Soon, the neighborhood police made their presence well known and began to protect the young South Asian children.

Since then, Jamoona has continued to work closely with police officers in various precincts in Queens, as well as with other social service agencies. She takes local Police Captains to churches, mosques and temples so that people come to know his name and face. When they encounter a problem and are having a difficult time navigating the bureaucracy, the simple act of asking for the Captain by name can make a difference.

Last, Jamoona asks South Asian immigrants to become an active member of the community in which they live.

"We South Asians sit in our houses. We never go to police, P.T.A., or civic association meetings," she says. "We need to stand as a united group. Only once we do so can we can gain respect."

Creating safe spaces for South Asian youth

For South Asian youth, the opportunity to seek solace within their community can make a difference. Participating in the activities of organizations like SAYA! can also help remove the sting of discrimination and alienation that often accompanies their integration into "American" society.

This rings true in the words of 15 year-old Mohammed Shakur, a high school student who migrated to the U.S. from Bangladesh in 1989:

At age six, the color of my skin became a plague in my mind. My first vivid memory is of coming home from school on the Q29 bus when three kids came up to me. "You got money? You got a quarter," they asked me. Then, they said, "Yo, this nigger's Hindu. Get him!" They took me to the back of the bus and beat me up. That day I got the impression that South Asians are seen as weak people. In school, I was called Gandhi and Hindu. That hurt. As I got older, new jokes came up: "Hey you, I need a cab. Does your dad still drive a taxi? Does your dad still sell beef jerkey at the 7-11?" The harassment extended to other things - the food I ate, the clothes I wore, everything. As it continued, my grades went down from a 91 average to an 81 average. My self-esteem went down. In high school, things got better. But, still I got the jokes. Then, SAYA! came along. It was a huge boost for me and my culture. I said to myself, "Where have I been all this time?" SAYA! brought me back.

For more information, email South Asian Youth Action (SAYA!) at saya@worldnet.att.net.

Sandhya Nankani is a freelance writer. Last April, she organized a daylong conference on domestic violence in the South Asian community jointly sponsored by Columbia University and St. John's University. She recently finished editing an anthology on the same subject. She can be reached by email at sandhyani@hotmail.com.

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