

the Newark area that there are these spaces that have developed that are completely South Asian. There are temples, lots and lots of temples, that are part of it, but more so individual families joining together and meeting with each other on the weekends.

I think South Asians are very proud in terms of their own culture and language. They try to teach that to the kids. The second generation finds it's very important to hold on to that. They can find it in movies and dance and music and coming together as families. But that doesn't mean that they're not assimilating well. They are very successful outside in the larger community. I think one of the issues that's important is that they lead this kind of dual life. When they go outside in the larger world they are very adjusted and high-power people doing whatever they're doing, and they come home and they have their religion and their language and food and families that come together.

In terms of third or fourth generation, we haven't been here that long so we don't know. I think there is definitely an effort to keep the cultures going. I find that the South Asian second generation tends to do a lot of volunteer work, going back to Pakistan and Bangladesh to keep the tie going. The first generation, too—they keep going back and forth a lot more than any community I've seen, almost every year or every other year. I do see in the universities that there are Pakistani clubs or South Asian clubs, so there is absolutely a very strong need and effort in the community to keep it going. That doesn't mean that it's not changing or that there's no authentic culture, but there are these strong themes that run through. I think food is one, music, the way people talk, the way kids address me even if I go to lectures. South Asian kids will come up and call me Auntie, which is very important in our communities; older women and older men are given respect.

Arranged Marriages: I was married at sixteen, and I followed my husband to the United States because he came here to do his Ph.D. studies. I had completed about two years of college in India by then.

Claiming Space

Shamita Das Dasgupta

Shamita Das Dasgupta is a founding member and director of Manavi, an organization dedicated to empowering South Asian women living in the United States.

Claiming space is very important: claiming space in terms of our bodies—there are more Asian faces, more Asian foods, more Buddhist and Hindu temples that have come up—and also symbolically, bringing in our ideas and thoughts that challenge the huge Western canons and philosophies. These are all ways of claiming space.

I always wear South Asian clothes, nothing else. I haven't changed, even now, and I won't. I was a kid when I came here and I wore jeans and stuff. When I came back into the community to work I made a very deliberate decision to change to South Asian clothing. This was mainly to let my community know that I'm one of them and they can't really dismiss me as a Westernized woman coming in and saying a bunch of garbage. This was a very deliberate decision on my part, to wear what I wear. And I won't go back anymore. I want to make sure that when I talk I do it in that language and that I look like them; that they recognize me as one of theirs and they don't have the opportunity to dismiss me. That I'm speaking from within them rather than outside on issues such as violence against women and race relations.

Assimilation: It is not location but the ethnicity that ties us together. You can see, for example, in Queens or South Jersey or

Our marriage was arranged, although I knew his family and him since childhood. Their family happened to live very close to my uncle's family. To this day, the majority of the marriages are arranged. In villages there may be a go-between; in cities you might find a go-between but if the families know each other, that's great. They might also advertise in matrimonial columns. Generally, the families get in touch with each other and see if the match is proper, whatever that might be. More and more in higher socioeconomic circles the prospective groom and bride meet each other after it's been worked out, but they have what I call veto power. They may just hate each other, or one party doesn't like it, in which case they can say no; if not, then it goes through. The parents take the trouble to see that the two are matched; there are all kinds of variables: education, socioeconomic status, class, anything you can think of.

Young people are okay with that because that's the way they've been brought up. I would still say, though, that there is definitely a shift toward more people getting to know each other and liking each other first, even though a majority are still arranged. That's how people were brought up.

The Other: I still feel my skin color and the way I look. I think this country is organized around race and "othering" people who look different than white Anglo people. So I absolutely have felt it and dealt with it—sometimes successfully and sometimes with anger.

I feel I am an American, but definitely would use a hyphenated "American," because I don't want to give up who I am, and perhaps so that other parts of my life are not lost or ignored. We have to recognize that we have multiple identities, multiple nationalities, multiple ways of doing things. The question of who is an American is problematic in itself, isn't it? Who is American and what is American? So in that sense I do claim a space, but I want to make that space complex and problematize it and make it as unique as I can.



Shamita Das Dasgupta (photo courtesy of Saptarshi Das)

I go back to India to do work there. I spend about three to four months there every year. Most of my family is in India. I've lost my mother but my father is ninety years old and he's still living with my brother and his wife. I feel a tremendous connection to South Asia and a tremendous connection to the United States, because this is where I've done my work and have my friends and my family and my home.

Values: Education is very important. Being close to family is also very important as is bringing up children who are honorable and good and nonviolent. The issue of justice is extremely important to me and my family. I hope I've imparted it to my daughter.

Bengali is my language, but I also speak Hindi. And I understand various other South Asian languages. My daughter was born here and when she was growing up we insisted she speak Bengali.

She kept the language, and now that she has two children she insists that they both speak Bengali. So both my grandchildren speak Bengali and German because their father is German. And I'm just amazed to see that.

For me, there is huge pride in being a South Asian, a Bengali woman. I see myself in these concentric circles: being a Bengali woman, a South Asian and Indian woman in the struggle for justice for our community. I see that as an issue of tremendous pride.