South Asian-owned businesses have been multiplying rapidly in some areas of the U.S.

subcontinent and the growing populations of South Asians all over the world. They worry that the chair will be used to bolster the study of antiquities and Sanskrit, which one student called the "Latin of Asia." Once the language of India in ancient times, there are now only a few thousand native Sanskrit speakers.

"We want them to pay attention to what South Asians care about today," said Anita Vasuedevan, a U.C. Berkeley student. "After all, it is our heritage they make a living working on and it is their interpretation that we are receiving. They should have a certain accountability to us." Vasuedevan and others point out that there are only a handful of South Asian professors working for the university, and feel that the U.C. Berkeley administration is using the local Indian community to advance the goals of white researchers who have long tenures in the department, to the benefit of only a narrow segment of the South Asian community.

In the context of a period in which "multi-culturalism" is a hot topic at universities across the country, progressive South Asian students have been organizing to pressure the U.C. Berkeley administration to deal with these issues — and at the same time striving to define their own political identity. "[The administration] thinks we are just another 'model minority,'" said another student, "educated and upwardly mobile, not about to rock any boats or get involved in any political activism. They think we can be counted on to maintain the status quo, proof that in America it doesn't matter what color your skin is, you can always 'make it.'"

In fact, the South Asian organizations and individuals who came up with nearly a half a million dollars for the chair probably did so exactly for that reason, to show that they have "made it" and to add to their prestige and influence by getting involved in education in a way familiar to wealthy people of any ethnicity or race. It shouldn't come as a surprise that a South Asian Studies program in the middle of one of the country's biggest concentrations of people from the Indian sub-continent would turn to well-off members of the community for financial assistance.

What is a surprise, say many Bay Area South Asians, is that there was any kind of controversy at all over the particulars. "The South Asians on campus are very vocal all of a sudden," remarked Jane Singh, a lecturer in ethnic studies at U.C. Berkeley, "and the administration is going to have to pay attention to them and add some of the courses on contemporary issues that the students are demanding. Their voices are being heard."

She points out, however, that voices from the "struggling other half" of the South Asian community are not yet being heard. Like the students, working-class South Asians — many of whom are more recent immigrants — have yet to fully define themselves politically in relation to American society.

With immigrants from South Asia making up the third largest category of Asian immigrants in recent years, however, some members of the community predict that it is only a matter of time before a "critical mass" develops that gives rise to activist organizations and a more specific political identity.

Farmworkers and Doctors

South Asians who immigrate to the U.S. come primarily from India, although there are smaller numbers from the other countries of the Indian sub-continent — Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Bhutan and Nepal. India itself is a large and diverse country, and immigrants reflect the ethnic, religious and cultural differences found in the nation itself. But the community in the U.S. is defined as much by when different members arrived here as by where they came from.

The first wave of immigrants, if a sum total of four or five thousand can be called a wave, arrived at the turn of the century, landing primarily in northern California and on up into Canada. Most went into the agricultural areas to become farmworkers, or into the logging industry. Their experience was similar to that of other Asians who arrived on the west coast at that time. Exclusion measures, alien land laws (which made it illegal for non-citizens to own land) and bias made it difficult to get into the country, harder to get ahead and nearly impossible to get citizenship.

Their status was made very clear early on. In a well-known Supreme Court decision, South Asians (mostly Sikhs from the Punjab region of northern India) tried to challenge the laws that prohibited anybody except "free white men" from obtaining citizenship by arguing that Indians were, in fact, Caucasian. The Supreme Court was forced to agree with this definition, but decided that to the "man on the street" Indians were still "colored," and therefore not eligible to become naturalized, nor able to bring over wives and family.

It was not until the 1940s, when immigration laws were relaxed somewhat, that some spouses and families were allowed to join the men in the U.S. To this day, there are sizeable populations, descended from the original immigrants, living in California's Central and Imperial Valleys. It is the wave of immigrants that came after the 1965 revision of the immigration laws that, to many, define the South Asian community in the United States.

This time settling more or less equally on both coasts, the South Asians who arrived in large numbers in the late 1960s and 70s were for the most part professionals, especially doctors and engineers. U.S. immigration regulations at the time, much like the ones currently in effect, encouraged professionals to immigrate (see sidebar on page 25).

By the end of the 1970s, however, there were fewer professionals and more working people arriving on U.S. shores. Especially in the last ten years or so, the family reunification provisions of the immigration laws (the "fifth preference") meant that families of professionals were allowed in in larger numbers, without necessarily being professionals themselves. Second, restrictions in the immigration laws pushed by professional groups in the U.S., such as the "Health Professionals Act," reduced the number of doctors allowed to immigrate, leaving more room for people with lower levels of education and training.

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> ***On the other hand, the other Asian student groups don't really see South Asians as part of the Asian picture or part of their constituency."***

In short, say South Asians contacted for this article, the last ten years has seen a boom in people working as grocery clerks, gas station attendants, cab drivers and kitchen workers — the usual gamut of low-paid service jobs available to people without higher education in the U.S. There has also been a visible rise in small service enterprises owned by South Asians, the best-known probably being restaurants and copy shops (such as Krishna Copy in the San Francisco area).

At the same time, the wave of professionals who came after 1965 has produced a second generation that differs in important respects from their parents. "My mother could never have come out as a feminist or a lesbian if she felt that way," said one twenty-five-year old activist, who asked not to be identified. "And I doubt she sees herself as a person of color, or even as an Asian. A lot of the South Asians my age I know are pretty conservative, but there are a lot who have been radicalized by the fact of being a person of color in a white society."

The Politics of Identity

It is in this second generation, say many self-described progressive South Asians, that the beginnings of a politicized South Asian community are beginning to be felt. "I think we are starting to see something happening," said Sumeeta Gawande in an interview. "It's just beginning, but there are a lot of new groups that call themselves 'South Asian' that are getting going. And that's how you can tell if they're progressive or not — if they call themselves South Asian."

The immigrants who came in the wave of professionals tended to identify themselves primarily by the country or even the region they came from, rather than as part of a larger Asian or South Asian community. They are also notoriously conservative. By self-identifying as South Asian, explains Gawande, people signal that they see themselves as part of a larger community that has something in common with all Asians, or at least with others from the Asian sub-continent.

"The question of identity is very important to the South Asian students on campus," said Singh, "but it is not clear to everyone where they belong. People ask, 'well, are we really Asian?'" On the other hand, the other Asian student groups don't really see South Asians as part of the Asian picture or part of their constituency."

"Well, I think this is starting to change," replies Niru Somasundarum. "Even five years ago you didn't have the established Asian-American groups reaching out to people from South Asia, but I think they are now beginning to see us as being included in that category."

She points out that women's groups working on domestic violence and other issues have started to make themselves known in the community.

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