



September 11, 2001, is a day that has been etched into our history forever. While South Asians in the United States mourned the loss of life and absorbed the impact of the attack on our soil, simultaneously, members of our community faced backlash and negative stereotyping.

Sadly, over the past decade, incidents of discrimination have continued; however, there has also been new hope in the form of community-based organizations and initiatives that arose to respond to the needs of our communities. Today, South Asians, although still targets, are in a much stronger position to raise their voices and call for *An America for All of Us*.

On September 11, I was a 28-year-old attorney working for the Department of Justice's Civil Rights Division. I remember being evacuated from my federal office building that morning, and later heading across the 14th Street Bridge to my home in Arlington. I could hardly believe the sight of the Pentagon with smoke billowing from it and a large hole in its side.

As I tried to comprehend what had happened, my experiences were compounded by the stories of bias, backlash and violence directed at South Asians, Muslims, Sikhs and Arab Americans around the country. Overwhelmed with these accounts from community members experiencing discrimination, I along with several colleagues at the Civil Rights Division, began to collect and investigate these incidents. In every context — the workplace, the schoolyard, the airport and borders, and even places of worship — community members reported increased levels of harassment, bullying, and surveillance.

Many recounted their hesitation to contact law enforcement, even in the wake of violent crimes, for fear of being investigated or detained. It did not help that government agencies were often inconsistent in their response and approach. While one arm of the federal government was trying to protect the rights of those affected by bias and hate crimes, another component, of often the very same agency, was simultaneously enforcing a series of destructive policies targeting South Asian, Arab and Muslim American communities. Policies such as NSEERS or Special Registration, the Alien Absconder Initiative, and arbitrary detentions and deportations — that many Americans have likely not even heard of — have led to broken families, unlawful arrests and futures being put on hold for members of our community.

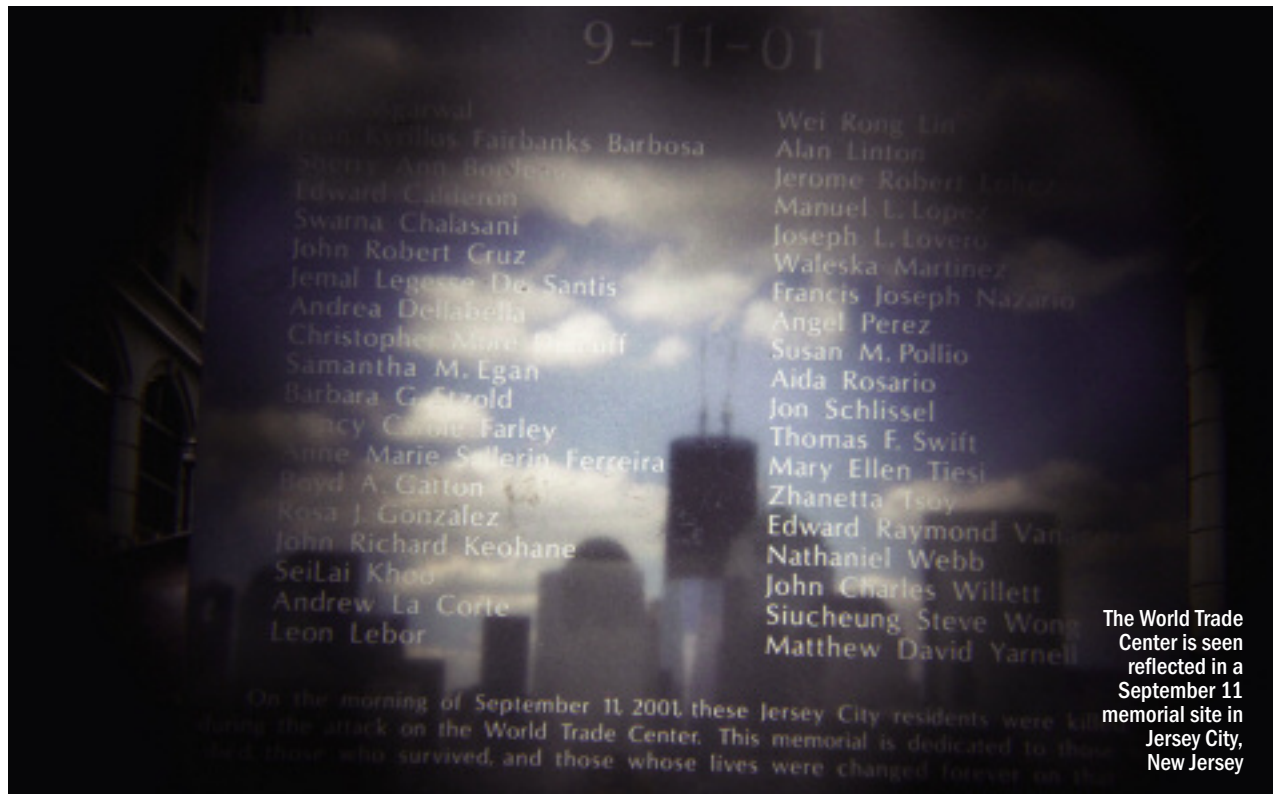
Into this landscape, South Asian organizations and advocates, like me, stepped in, and have been deeply transformed by the stories we heard, the changes in the facades of neighborhoods, and the struggles we have fought together.

In the September 11 aftermath, little national or local infrastructure existed within the South Asian community. Immediately after the tragedy, organizations scrambled to address emergencies, like ensuring that community members could access and apply for September 11-related benefits; referring victims of bias incidents to appropriate authorities; and partnering with lawyers to provide 'know your rights' workshops.

Over the years, South Asian Americans Leading Together, where I work, has collaborated with a number of organizations to create a National Coalition of South Asian Organizations that provides an advocacy voice for our communities.

Similarly, other entities that had existed prior to September 11 found themselves stretching to respond to growing concerns. Domestic violence organizations, like Sakhi for South Asian Women, for example, had to encounter the impact of the post-September 11 backlash on

From crisis to hope



The World Trade Center is seen reflected in a September 11 memorial site in Jersey City, New Jersey

SHANNON STAPLETON/REUTERS

the women they served. Organizations working with youth, such as South Asian Youth Action, had to address bullying and harassment issues that students faced, as well as promote tolerance and understanding in schools. And groups like Desis Rising Up and Moving, which had just begun organizing detainees and their family members, were inundated in the weeks and months after September 11.

In the Bay Area, the Alliance of South Asians Taking Action worked with other organizations there to create multi-racial spaces, link the backlash occurring after September 11 to similar incidents in our country's history, and to connect community members with legal services.

Organizations also grew into existence as a direct result of the September 11 tragedy and backlash. Among them is The Sikh Coalition, which was created on the night of September 11 in response to discrimination and violence community members were facing. The Council of Peoples Organization was created in February 2002 to provide a variety of services to the South Asian community in Brooklyn. The idea to form COPO came in the aftermath of September 11 when Central Brooklyn community members recognized the multiple levels of crisis faced by the low-income South Asian community, particularly the Muslim community. The Coney Island Avenue Project came together in the aftermath of September 11 as well with a walk-in clinic on Coney Island Avenue in Midwood, Brooklyn, to provide a safe place for South Asians to discuss their issues and learn more about their rights.

These are only some of many organizations that have helped build a stronger South Asian community in the US. Despite these efforts, today, many in our communi-

ties still experience a level of xenophobia and racism that is reminiscent of the days and months after September 11. The Park51 community center controversy and proposed Quran burnings of last summer, the restrictions on mosque constructions from New Jersey to Tennessee to California, Congressional hearings held by Representative Peter King, and the inflammatory language used by elected officials or candidates for political office are fueling negative opinions about Muslims and those who perceived to be Muslims.

The impact of Islamophobia is not just limited to the Muslim community. Sikhs, Christians, Hindus, and even Latinos and African-Americans have been subjected to bias and negative treatment due to their skin color, religious appearance, country of origin, or name.

As we look to the 10-year anniversary of September 11, we, as South Asian Americans, have the opportunity to craft a vision for the next decade. There are examples all around us: the interfaith collaborations to support the Muslim community in Tennessee, where two mosques were vandalized; the bonds forged between Japanese American and Muslim youth in California and Seattle who learn about the connections between the WWII internment and the post-September 11 backlash; or the resolutions passed recently in New Jersey that emphasize a 'no-tolerance' position when it comes to bias and bullying.

As a nation, we have much to reflect upon, much to heal, and much to work on, but we can rely upon the resilience of communities of all faiths and backgrounds to come together and create the world we want to live in and hand over to our children.

Deepa Iyer is Executive Director, South Asian Americans Leading Together, a national, non-partisan, non-profit organization that is in the midst of An America for All of Us campaign to affirm fundamental American ideals to mark the 10-year anniversary of 9/11.



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