

# **“Liting it up”: Popular Culture, Indo-Pak Basketball, and South Asian American Institutions**

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## **Abstract**

South Asian American participants of a co-ethnic basketball league, known as Indo-Pak Basketball, utilized urban basketball vernacular through the phrase “liting it up” to identify individuals scoring points in great numbers—the person “liting it up” becomes visible and receives recognition. Accordingly, I want to “lite up”, recognize, and make visible the role of South Asian American cultural institutions, especially religious centers, in constructing sporting venues as one key site to Americanisation. I situate sport as one manner in which South Asian American communities work out, struggle through, and contest notions of self. Accordingly, my findings indicate that such community formation, as South Asian *Americans*, through the prism of sport, offer critiques and complicate notions of identity and belonging at the same time that the cultural parameters of citizenship continue to exclude various “Others.” In short, the paper demonstrates that co-ethnic basketball allows certain South Asian American men opportunities to claim American-ness, but they mediate and negotiate this identity in their own interests. Indeed, the paper also points to cultural limitations and exclusions within Indo-Pak Basketball whereby attitudes towards women and gays are conservative.

**Key words:** Sport studies, Cultural Citizenship, South Asian America, Race and Ethnicity

## **Interview with Malik (member of an Indo-Pak Basketball team known as “Atlanta Outcasts”):**

*Malik, a Pakistani Muslim American, who was born in Atlanta and grew up locally, chose a sports bar for our meeting and subsequent interview. This sports bar was located near the venue where we played pick-up (recreational) basketball once a week with South Asian American peers. With many TVs tuned into a variety of sports, sports talk and sports coverage resonated through this establishment. As Malik and I started going over his life history and passion for basketball, I did not expect Malik to attribute his love of basketball with an institution that is unfamiliar in the US sporting landscape. During the course of conversation, he informed me that his father and other Muslim elders considered deeply the idea of a basketball court on premises of the first non African American mosque built in Atlanta.<sup>1</sup> The founders of Al-Farooq Masjid wanted to include a basketball court on its premises. Malik explained that his “father and a couple of elders wanted to include a basketball court” as a means to help their children—their*

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<sup>1</sup> In the late 1960s and even early 1970s, the mosques in Atlanta were primarily African American. Of these, there exist mainstream African American Muslims and Nation of Islam African American Muslims.

sons—find ways to “assimilate into US society” thereby not feeling the alienation that had been felt by the first generation.

The interview with Malik points to two interesting social phenomena that are interrelated: 1) Cultural alienation by first generation South Asians in the US whereby legal citizenship does not guarantee cultural citizenship and 2) The role of South Asian American institutions in providing venues for integration into mainstream US culture for Muslims. Malik, a Muslim South Asian American, was born in Atlanta and his father is a prominent businessperson in that city. He mentions, through the figure of his father, how marginalization and dislocation take place for Muslims in a Christian dominated US culture (Joshi 2006). Elements of popular culture, such as sport, present minority groups with one such venue for “cultural citizenship” (Maira 2009) through which cultural practices and its respective social relations produce different sets of belonging within the US national fabric. Sport, therefore, presents a venue through which to contest normativities, along the axes of race, ethnicity, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality, associated with American culture. In addition, South Asian American participants, through South Asian American cultural institutions, actively engage with sport to create their own cultural contours of belonging in the US and within South Asian America—a form of cultural citizenship that collapses ethnic identity as South Asians *and* national identity as US citizens. Instead of being marginalized, passive communities, South Asian Americans and their respective cultural-religious institutions parlay in various kinds of belonging.

I use the term “liting it up” to highlight those elements of popular culture and urban basketball vernacular that implicate the parameters of group identity as South Asian Americans. While the study of cultural texts such as “bhangra” (Maira 2002) and Bollywood are important to this key idea of a collective self, the South Asian American participants in basketball social spaces emphasized basketball and hip hop as key elements of popular culture instead of a Bollywood—informed subjectivity. Whereas “bhangra” has transnational flows and implications and Bollywood implicates South Asian, the choice of basketball aligns with discourses that produce basketball as quintessentially American. Therefore, South Asian American institutions do not simply rely on cultural nostalgia associated with South Asia—such as bhangra dance forms and Bollywood film—but instead use local sporting spaces of US basketball to pass along cultural systems of meaning and identity around “South Asian American-ness.” These sensibilities then shape South Asian American-ness with particular cultural contours. Key among these is male dominance and a heterosexual masculinity which, as this paper shows, limits full participation of female and male basketballers within the South Asian American community. So although South Asian American basketball spaces enculturate heterosexual South Asian American males into American popular culture, it excludes women and marginalizes queer subjects.

As religious and cultural South Asian American institutions sets parameters of South Asian American-ness through sport, these institutions interrogate cultural distinctions and cultural affiliations associated with notions of American citizenship. I want to illuminate, “lite up” if you will, the key role of South Asian American institutions as not simply sites of cultural difference but as sites of different sets of American-ness. These institutions are sites where agency is acted out not only by institutions but also by the young men who have persuaded their cultural/religious institutions to have an active involvement with US popular culture.<sup>2</sup> Instead of locating these cultural institutions as antithetical to the US cultural fabric, this essay demonstrates how sporting practices at South Asian American institutions interrogate and complicate norms of citizenship in the US.

I argue that sport constitutes a realm where South Asian Americans act upon the normativities of citizenship and aim for inclusion through cultural engagement with existing tools of popular culture. Sport, as popular culture more broadly, opens up analysis of how institutions and individuals in ethnic American communities engage with the mainstream society and produce cultural constructions of self that promote values of US citizenship and contribute to a sense of belonging within South Asian America. A careful examination of popular culture, Lipstiz (1990, p. 40) argues, “open up for sustained analysis the everyday life activities of popular culture consumers, youth subcultures, and ethnic minorities...they provide sophisticated and convincing arguments about the ways in which the commonplace and ordinary practices of everyday life often encode larger social and ideological meaning.” Everyday experiences of sport – basketball – at mosques and South Asian American churches detail both the engagement by young people and institutions with popular culture through which they ascribe particular meanings to their social universe. Social interactions around basketball and respective conversations at these social venues index complex social phenomenon surrounding acts of belonging for South Asian Americans.

### **Background on South Asian America**

South Asians in the Americas have faced various forms of displacement from the US cultural fabric through the stereotypical figures of the licentious “Hindoo” (Shah 2005), the idealised “model minority” (Prashad 2000), and the recalcitrant “terrorist/Muslim” (Puar 2007). South Asian American participants in Indo-Pak Basketball either encountered the racialising discourses mentioned above or had ancestors who

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<sup>2</sup> This commentary was provided by Prof. Jon Hale and Prof. Beth Tarasawa who offered a reading of an earlier draft. Dr. Daniel Burdsey and Dr. Samaya Farooq also provided valuable commentary. I am grateful to Dr. Daryl Adair for his suggestions on earlier drafts and previous work. I am also grateful to my mentors, Dr Martin Manalansan and Dr Junaid Rana, for their intellectual guidance.

did. Although the term “Indo-Pak Basketball” references Indians and Pakistanis, the participants in this South Asian-only league come from Canada and the US with ancestral ties to many places including India and Pakistan. The parents of these players came to North America through multiple immigration waves from the early 1900s onwards. The basketball teams from Vancouver, Canada, have players whose ancestors arrived on North American shores in the early 1900s (Chan 1991); they are considered fourth generation North Americans. Some of the ethnic Punjabis (from the region of India and Pakistan known as Punjab before independence from the British) moved down from Vancouver, as a result of persecution, to places in California; they formed their own bachelor communities and married Mexican women, but their grandchildren do not play in Indo-Pak Basketball (Leonard 1992).

Most of the US Indo-Pak Basketball players’ parents arrived in the waves following the 1965 Immigration Act that opened US borders to professional workers from South Asia as a means to compete with the USSR during the height of the Cold War (Prashad 2000). The early post-1965 wave brought in scientists, doctors, engineers, and nurses (Agarwal 1991); these professionals and their children would be deemed “model minority” as a result of their academic success and social mobility. Players whose parents came through this wave attended four year universities, had social mobility, and are themselves professionals (Dhingra 2007).

Another significant South Asian immigration wave to the US took place in the late twentieth century. In 1980, the Family Preference Act was passed—it gave preference for immigration to siblings and family members of the early waves (Khandelwal 2002). Unlike their counterparts in the early post-1965 immigration waves, those that came after 1980 were not classed in the same upwardly mobile manner as their earlier counterparts (Mathew 2005). Several of the Indo-Pak basketball players’ parents and the parents of those players in Atlanta’s South Asian American basketball scene came through the post-1980 immigration waves; these young men did not all attend four year universities and do not have the same high level profession.

Most of the South Asian American research participants were born in or grew up in the US—some had families that came immediately after 1965 and others who came after the 1980 Family Preference Act. Regardless of the immigration wave, participants encountered political and racial discourses after 9/11 that produced them as abject, “forever foreign” (Prashad 2000) subjects. This proved especially true for the Pakistani Muslim American participants in my study. The increase in racial acts and racist acts based on the new racial formation, “Muslim looking,” led to their marginalization in US society (Ahmad 2004). Accordingly, their religious and cultural institutions became key sites for political and racial violence by

mainstream society and the US state—these institutions were semantically constructed as “Un-American.” Nativist sentiment and local surveillance surfaced in another incident with the Dar-e Abbas mosque in Lilburn, Georgia (a city adjacent to Atlanta); this heightened Islamophobic rhetoric emerged in relation to the expansion of an existing mosque. Dar-e Abbas mosque had been a part of this community for eleven years and wanted to expand with a Muslim cemetery to accommodate the needs of its members.<sup>3</sup> The *Gwinnett Daily Post* newspaper and *CBS News* covered nativist responses—some of the quotes from non-Muslim locals follow:

*“This is about hurting our community, this is about hurting our kids”*

*“I just don't like Muslims and I don't want them taking over our neighborhood”*

*“This is not what Lilburn needs. This is a Christian community, and they are anti-Christian.”<sup>4</sup>*

Such diatribes locate South Asian Americans in cultural parameters through a religion that was depicted as irreconcilable with American-ness. South Asian American populations have felt state surveillance intimately in Atlanta in an environment where they are stereotyped as recalcitrant, dangerous masculine subjects (Puar 2007). There lies an explicit emphasis on the Christian ethos of US belonging and a nativist belief in the bankrupt morality—a defunct American-ness—of local Muslims. On the contrary, South Asian American institutions stress their “American-ness” and cultural citizenship through the practice of basketball. As cultural norms and values embedded in Judeo-Christian national ethos and post-9/11 racial hysteria displace South Asian Americans, South Asian Americans and their institutions utilize sporting cultures—along with its respective values and cultural norms—to perform practices of belonging. The participants in this study, all second generation South Asians in the US, dealt with experiences of exclusion at the moment in which they, along with their cultural institution, engage with popular culture to cement their American-ness.

## Methodology

How do inclusions and exclusions through sporting processes of cultural citizenship materialize? What are the cultural contours of membership in the US and among South Asian Americans that create new inclusions and exclusions? To answer these questions and situate the role of South Asian American institutions in contests over American-ness, I use a Queer Diasporic Critique (Gopinath 2005) to

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<sup>3</sup> This information came from an activist organization in Atlanta called “Movement to End Israeli Apartheid-Georgia” (MEIA Georgia); they organized to support this local mosque.

<sup>4</sup> These quotes come from MEIA and their archiving of quotes from TV news from the local CBS station as well as the *Gwinnett Daily Post* newspaper.

interrogate nation and South Asian America. Such a queer framework serves to interrogate normativities in the construction of nation, diaspora, and institutions—“queer” serves as an anti-normative signifier (Manalansan 2003).

In order to flesh out the voices of institutions and individuals in Atlanta’s South Asian American community, this ethnographic project also included surveys and interviews. With the size of the large South Asian American population in Atlanta and in the larger Indo-Pak Basketball North American circuit, I utilized surveys. I gave out 150 surveys, in person and over electronic mail, which allowed informants to write out responses at their own pace. Survey questions were aimed around finding immigration history, parent’s professional background, experiences with basketball, players’ basketball heroes, social class, and players’ professions. These questions allowed me to locate the background of respondents.

To make sense of how respondents attribute meanings to their everyday practices in sport and how community elders give voice to their institutions, I utilized semi-structured interviews and participant observation. I conducted ethnographic research on South Asian American communities in Atlanta while also paying close attention to the Chicago Indo-Pak National tournament. Ethnographic research consisted of prolonged personal engagement with Atlanta’s South Asian American community in order to make sense of the meanings they place upon certain actions, institutions, and discourses. As a South Asian American researcher, I have not only conducted research on this population since summer 2006 but have known gatekeepers in the Atlanta Indo-Pak Basketball scene since 1994. My “insider” status, as a South Asian American, facilitated movement within these social milieus; participants spoke openly with me as a member of their community. In summer 2006, the research project began with establishing rapport with key members, mostly Muslim American men, in the South Asian American community. Building rapport with gatekeepers, I utilized the “snow-ball” sampling technique whereby gatekeepers pointed me to various other men and women in the community, thereby expanding the social network. After summer 2006, ethnographic research continued through summer 2007 and summer 2008; this consisted of visits to the Chicago Indo-Pak Basketball tournament in 2006 and 2008 while spending the majority of this time conducting research in Atlanta. This research project culminated with eight months of research with Atlanta’s Indo-Pak Basketball community from January 2009 till August 2009; during this time I lived with one of my informants for a month while charting the bodily gestures, signs, and discourses in the professional lives, family lives, and sporting lives of the respondents. Most of the young South Asian American men were in their twenties and thirties, while the community elders consisted of

women and men in their sixties. The South Asian American young women in the study were persons that gatekeepers suggested I interview.

I took special notice of their acts, signs, symbols—all part of the everyday practices of individuals and institutions—that critiqued US citizenship while normalizing the claims by heterosexual men about South Asian American-ness. Examining sporting practices allowed me to jot down how South Asian American institutions and individuals encode significance; not only in sport, but how such acts of meaning making and cultural citizenship point to larger social processes. Although a heterogeneity of religions within the category of South Asian America exists, I discussed the role of Malayalee<sup>5</sup> Christian churches in the US and the mosques in Atlanta. Malayalee American respondents provided knowledge on how their experiences with basketball came through their own churches, while Muslim South Asian Americans in Atlanta point to the mosques as sites of Americanisation.

Although South Asian American, I was sensitive to my subject position and essentialising practices; thus, I utilized a Feminist trope (hooks 1984) to center the voices of my informants and not let my voice represent the entirety of South Asian America. Although I am a South Asian American, the intersections of class, religions (I am a Christian South Asian American), gender, immigration wave, and ethnicity make the category of South Asian America shifting, in flux, and multiply inflected. Accordingly, I took into consideration the heightened US state surveillance and racial hysteria faced by Muslim South Asian American participants since late 2001; therefore, I gave informed consent forms to my subjects and maintain their confidentiality through the use of pseudonyms.

Interviews with players, captains, and tournament organizers of the Chicago Indo-Pak Basketball tournament were audio-recorded—this consisted of thirteen interviews alongside participant observation. The sheer pace of the games and brief intervals between games limited the number of interviews. In Atlanta, I interviewed fourteen South Asian Americans. These interviews prove valuable resources of life histories but the majority of the data comes from field notes. Most interviews took place on the court between games with some interviews in places that my informants chose, such as their homes or cafes. I conducted 28 interviews with various players and team captains. These interviews provided insight on the life histories of these young people and their involvement with basketball—it gave meaning to their leisure choices. The interview guide for Indo-Pak participant interviews consisted of questions that asked them about their family history, how they got to know of Indo-Pak Basketball, their reasons for playing in

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<sup>5</sup> Malayalees are an ethnic group from the state of Kerala in India. Although there are Hindu Malayalees, the majority of Malayalee American participants in Indo-Pak Basketball and in Atlanta's South Asian American basketball scene were Christian Malayalee Americans.

Indo-Pak Basketball, and how it compares with the greater South Asian American public. Through these questions, the answers painted a complex picture of South Asian America that spoke of the different immigration waves, experiences of racialisation and racism, the instrumental role of institutions in engendering basketball social interactions, and the safe spaces of South Asian American basketball publics.

I also interviewed key South Asian American elders in the South Asian American community. These interviewees were identified by my Indo-Pak Basketball informants; each came to Atlanta either in the early to late 1970s or after the 1980 Family Preference Act—they represented both major immigration waves. I interviewed four Muslim community elders in their homes, their place of work, or at the masjid. These elders provided not only their family histories but also accounts of diachronic change in Atlanta's South Asian American community. Furthermore, these community elders articulated the purpose of sport in South Asian American institutions, its relevance to "American-ness", and whom they aimed to reach with such sporting activities. These interviews provided first-hand accounts of the importance of sport for the first generation as a means of assimilation for their children.

Most material from Atlanta comes through participant observation. I attended and participated with two Pakistani Muslim American Indo-Pak Basketball teams—Atlanta Outcasts and Atlanta Rat Pack—in Indo-Pak Basketball tournaments at local Hindu Mandirs (temples), at Georgia Institute of Technology, and at Georgia State University; I took note of the interactions on and off the basketball court. Atlanta Outcasts consists of young men whose parents arrived after 1980 to US shores. Atlanta Rat Pack players have parents who came through the early immigration waves and are deemed "model minority." In order to make sense of the time, meaning, affect, and energy put into basketball activities, I played in recreational games, organized leagues, and in tournaments. I took notice of how they trained their bodies through not only basketball and by working out with them at local gyms (see Sands 2002); these are examples of how institutions discursively produced exemplars of South Asian American masculinity in conjunction with American-ness. Playing basketball took various forms, from recreational basketball at a player's house, to "pick-up"<sup>6</sup> at local gyms, to playing Monday and Thursday nights at a local gym. Participant observation also consisted of partaking in activities outside of basketball with these team members such as the party scene, pick-up basketball, invitation to Friday prayers at mosques, dinners, and grand events such as weddings.

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<sup>6</sup> "Pick-up" basketball consists of loose recreational play at gyms. Some gyms require signing up on a sheet to play while others have players pick teams. It often has a structure of play dictated by the number of people present and the facilities present.

One recurring theme emerged in this ethnographic project: it consisted of the normalizing of men, sport, and citizenship. There existed a “patriarchal dividend” whereby men could participate in sport—but women and queer subjects could not participate in these sporting venues as players. Women, often spouses of Indo-Pak Basketball players, took active roles as organizers and volunteers at tournaments but the articulation of citizenship through sport projected women and queer subjects as abject US and abject South Asian American subjects. The talk by community elders, the conversations and actions by Indo-Pak Basketball players, and the narratives by women and queer subjects indicated the prevalence of normative projects of membership within the nation and diaspora that excluded both women and queers.

### **Origins of Indo-Pak Basketball in the US**

Although various sporting regimes exist in South Asian America, this paper examines basketball cultural practices and the ubiquitous nature of basketball in the lives of these second generation South Asian Americans. Some parents of Indo-Pak Basketball players engaged actively with cricket and field hockey<sup>7</sup> but their children favored basketball. However, the young men did not choose basketball by individual choice but rather through the influence and collusion of the NBA, Nike, and media agents (LaFeber 1999). During the 2006 Chicago Indo-Pak Basketball tournament, I sought out Max as an interviewee. Atlanta Outkasts player, Mustafa, suggested that I meet Max to find out more about Indo-Pak Basketball, and also as a result of the increased popularity, significance, and prominence of the Chicago tournament. I asked Max, “How did you become involved with basketball?” He replied, “Well, I didn’t play basketball initially. I loved baseball and that was what I played.” Puzzled, I inquired, “Why did you play basketball?” With a matter of fact assurance, Max said, “All my friends started playing basketball. I am from Chicago, it was Michael Jordan’s city. I couldn’t escape it. I loved the competition.” LaFeber (1999), Farred (2006), and Andrews (2000) examine how the spectacularity of Michael Jordan spread basketball globally and locally. Max, an ethnic Malayalee Christian American, created Indo-Pak Basketball in the US in 1989 while being influenced by the iconicity of Michael Jordan. However, Michael Jordan’s popularity and linkages between basketball, cool, and American-ness were also re-constructed by Max’s Malayalee church.

Opportunities for basketball play came through unlikely but interesting South Asian American institutions—South Asian American religious centers and cultural organizations. Why would sporting

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<sup>7</sup> Mustafa, one of the Muslim Atlanta Indo-Pak Basketball players, and his brother, Ali, played cricket only a couple of times, according to them, at the local mosque with elders. In addition, Mustafa’s father told me that he played field hockey at a national level back in Pakistan.

spaces for basketball prove necessary or relevant? Basketball stood as a key site for a rendezvous with US society for South Asian Americans. Maram (2006) describes how popular culture and sport present opportunities for Filipino men to assert their masculinity while finding a process to “Americanization.” Like the subjects in Maram’s work, South Asian American institutions, as well as individuals, utilized basketball as a means to assert their “American-ness.” For Max, ethnically Christian Malayalee American, the Malayalee Church<sup>8</sup> and Malayalee cultural organizations played a critical role in advocating basketball for its *male* population. Although female nurses led the immigration wave of Malayalees to the US after 1965 (George 2005), the church opened up spaces of Americanisation for its young men. Referencing his experience playing basketball with Malayalee American institutions, Max said, “They [Malayalee church and Malayalee community elders] would break up the teams. But...they would stack the best players on two teams. We would kill everyone, the games were easy. There was no competition and it wasn’t fair.” Although participating directly with his co-ethnic community through the Malayalee church, this religious institution also presented limitations to the conceptualization of basketball sporting cultures. Desiring the pleasures and intimacy of competition, Max created, along with help from his basketball playing peers in the Malayalee community, the first US Indo-Pak Basketball tournament in 1989 in Chicago.

With a growing Malayalee population in the US, co-ethnic organizations have emerged such as FOKANA “which is the national organization of Keralite associations in North America.” (Maira 2002, p. 86) Utilizing organizations like FOKANA and the Malayalee Churches (Evangelic, Church of South India, Syrian Orthodox, and Marthoma churches), Max reached out to Malayalee communities in Houston and Dallas.<sup>9</sup> As a result of coming up to Chicago for the Chicago IPN in 1989, Max agreed to bring Chicago teams to Houston and Dallas for their tournaments (Dallas in time would then structure and put in place the Indo-Pak tournament in Texas). Max also invited the various other ethnic South Asian American basketball teams in Chicago along with the Houston and Dallas teams to form the first Indo-Pak Basketball court played outdoors. The tournament currently holds the most prestige and provides invitations to seventeen teams, considered by their peers, to be the premier performers in the North American South Asian community.

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<sup>8</sup> Max is a product of parents of Evangelic and Church of South India religious background. He married Rathi whose dad is Hindu but mom is a Malayalee Syrian Orthodox (known as Jackobite).

<sup>9</sup> Dallas hosts one of the big four Indo-Pak Basketball tournaments. The organizer of the Dallas tournament is also a Malayalee Christian American like Max. The other sites for national Indo-Pak Basketball tournaments are Washington, DC (it is specifically in Maryland close to DC) and California (San Francisco). One other tournament takes place in early summer in Vancouver, British Columbia.

## **Al-Farooq Masjid and Atlanta's South Asian American Muslim Community**

Mustafa (captain of Atlanta Outcasts and Pakistani Muslim American) played in the 1998 Chicago Indo-Pak Basketball tournament. Like Max, Mustafa and his basketball peers encountered the intimacies of American-ness and basketball at their mosque (masjid). Similarly, Mustafa played various other sports. Mustafa said, "Man, it was the move from Canada to Houston when I first played basketball. I played soccer before that." Similar to the role of the Malayalee American institutions in Indo-Pak Basketball formation, masjids (mosques) played an instrumental role in sporting identities for Atlanta's South Asian American men. Although opportunities to play cricket, a game imagined as South Asian, existed at the various masjids, the male participants in this study chose basketball and its subsequent social interactions. In the opening interview, Malik (a member of Atlanta Outcasts), told of how Muslim elders incorporated a basketball goal on mosque grounds for young Muslim men. Dr. Said is one such Muslim elder who played a critical role in the founding and structuring of Al-Farooq Masjid. According to Dr. Said, the South Asian Muslim community in 1977 was "small" and about "50 or 70 people" who were professionals and "mostly students or academics...majority of the Muslims were affiliated with the university" meeting at the Georgia Institute of Technology Student Center.

With this Muslim community growing, they purchased a house near the Georgia Institute of Technology campus in 1980 that became the Al-Farooq Masjid.<sup>10</sup> Initially, no basketball court existed on mosque grounds and the elders noticed young men playing at the basketball court at a nearby educational facility—Homepark Learning Center—during their break from activities at the mosque. Sultan (Dr. Said's son) and Ali (Mustafa's younger brother) both played for Atlanta Outcasts and discussed spending considerable time socializing during Islamic camps. In between camp sessions, Sultan said that he and Ali "would hoop during the break...that is all we did. We did not want to go back." Implementing sports in general and basketball in particular at Al-Farooq Masjid brought in young men since, according to Dr. Said, basketball was: "1. Inexpensive, 2. All the youth are attracted, 3. Don't need many people, and 4. Not dangerous but still *manly*."<sup>11</sup> In this sense, commonsensical associations take place between manliness and basketball. Dr. Said also alluded to the NBA and the influence of "indirect role models" in addition to Michael Jordan and Larry Bird. To add, Dr. Said emphasized how young South Asian American men found a further level of intimacy with basketball through Muslims playing in the NBA who served as "indirect role models": Dr. Said referenced Hakeem Olajuwon (African Muslim), Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf (African American Muslim), and Atlanta native Sharif Abdul Rahim (African

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<sup>10</sup> This became the first international mosque and Dr. Said estimated that membership comes from Muslims from 45 different countries.

<sup>11</sup> This was Dr. Said's emphasis.

American Muslim). Basketball constituted an element of popular culture through which men could engage with mainstream ideas of cool and citizenship. These role models stood as exemplars of American manhood (although Hakeem Olajuwon is originally from Africa). Consumption of these figures and the respective basketball aesthetics allowed for claims to American-ness on Muslim grounds. Sultan highlighted the importance of basketball in the 1980s for piquing his interest and mentioned an idolization of Dominique Wilkins of the NBA Atlanta Hawks. Sultan stated, “I grew up in the best time of basketball, the 80s...the money wasn’t there yet...it was pure.”

In the mid to late 1990s, with the Atlanta Olympics in 1996, Atlanta’s Muslim population grew considerably with internal migration and South Asian immigration. Dr. Said estimated the Muslim population in Atlanta at “80,000 Muslims with 35% African American.” He mentioned how the remaining “65% of Muslims in Atlanta are half South Asian while the other half came from North Africa, Middle East, and Eastern Europe.” In line with the growth of the population, Dr. Said highlighted how Al-Farooq Masjid was under way for dramatic reconstruction, renovation, and expansion starting in 1995<sup>12</sup>; it now includes a full outdoor basketball court painted in green to fit Muslim aesthetics. To meet the demands of an expanding population, a neighborhood mosque, Omer Masjid, branched out from Al-Farooq Masjid<sup>13</sup> and now contains an indoor basketball court for its Muslim youth. Several of Atlanta’s South Asian American teams come out of Al-Farooq Masjid and players on these teams spent their young formative years playing basketball on mosque grounds. The teams are Atlanta Outkasts (played in the North American Indo-Pak Basketball circuit), Camel Jockeys, Atlanta Rat Pack, Sand Brothaz, Atlanta Franchise, and various others.

As these teams formed at the masjids, their formation also meant that “American-ness” could be attained by a particular few. Institutionally, Al-Farooq Masjid spatialized gender segregation with separate male and female activities along with separated gendered spaces. Therefore, gender segregation constituted one method of enculturation as ethnic Americans along the axes of gender and sexuality. Thus, venues for American-ness through basketball were normalized for heterosexual men while excluding women and queer subjects. Dr. Said did not mention spaces of sport for Muslim women; elders created social spaces within the mosque as distinctly “feminine” and “masculine.” When asking Sultan about interactions with young women at the mosque, he responded, “Girls played in the playground or hung out together in the

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<sup>12</sup> The new mosque houses a clinic, an academy for pre-Kindergarten to eight grade, a cemetery, School of Quranic memorization (there is a computer-based home schooling component to this as well), and a self-contained brother mosque known as Omer Masjid (it is a neighborhood mosque while Al-Farooq Masjid is the central mosque).

<sup>13</sup> There are, according to Dr. Said, over 40 different mosques that are neighborhood specific and also ethnically specific as a result of location and residential patterns.

hallway. They never played sports.” A young African American Muslim woman, Yasmin, stated, “There is a sports component for both girls and boy (basketball, I think).” Gendering basketball as masculine also limits who can partake, consume, and articulate their subjectivity through basketball.

In addition to gender segregation and affirmation of gender dichotomies, the spatializing of gender through sport also posits an opposition between queer-ness and basketball. Sharif, self-identifying as a gay Muslim South Asian American, gave testimony to heterosexist, marginalizing practices as well as the benefits of sport:

*“We had sleepovers at the mosque, field trips to different states, and Sunday school. We were introduced to each other and non Muslim South Asians at the mosque. I played in the sport gatherings with groups, I played basketball and football. People would make friends through sport. It [sport] got me out of my shell because I was introverted, being gay led to minimal conversations other than in sport. Sports gave me confidence, did not feel defiled. Overall, it was good. Homophobic terms were used on occasion and it irked me. There were talks about girls and marriage, these were the salient topics and made me feel isolated...I was not on Atlanta Outcasts because those guys went to more heterosexual places, clubs, with girls.”*

He alluded to the prevalence of homophobic terms in sport and underscored the intimate, intensified character of Urdu homophobic slurs, such as “gandu” and “chakka”. Sharif said,

*“These terms in our language can also be used as gender-bending words and when I use them it does not feel like I am compromising anything. I can use it to feel empowered through the language used against me. I have heard the Urdu words, and unlike ‘fag’ or ‘faggot,’ they are more penetrating. It is sweeter and used in a more painful feeling. It hurts a lot more...more offensive...king of sobering...you feel like you get angry when it is in English and feel sober and melancholy when used in Urdu. You feel like anger would be an anger against your own community and feel individualistic and feel like you are going against the community.”*

As the social interactions and conversations at the mosque evoke pain for queer subjects, any attempt to resist within that space only serves to produce them as failed Muslim subjects as a result of their sexuality. Basketball masculinities did not carry the same meaning for Sharif as they construct another exclusion at the very moment they resist hegemonic discourses that normalize whites and US cultural citizenship. As a result, a correlation emerged that normalized heterosexuality, citizenship, and American-ness whereby queer subjects face double exclusion within South Asian America and the US mainstream society. Thus, Sharif and other gay Muslims have formed their own sporting spaces to engage with

sporting pleasures; these are separate leagues that provide the safe spaces that the masjid is unable to provide. When talking with Mustafa and Sharif's name came up, I asked Mustafa if there were safe spaces at the mosque for gay men. Mustafa replied frankly, "They would kick his ass straight." With justification for separate queer sporting spaces, Sharif said, "We don't want to be violated, misunderstood, stereotyped. We also want to be loved."

### **Muslim 3-on-3 Tournament: Homosocial Celebrations of Masculinity**

This institutionalizing of gender and sexual difference by affirming sport as masculine and heterosexual also took place at a 3-on-3 basketball tournament sponsored by Omer Masjid and a group working with Atlanta's Muslim youth—Punnam.<sup>14</sup> Close investigation of the website for Punnam provides details on the organization, their mission, and their conceptualization of "ummah" (Muslim community). Muslim elders utilized basketball as one among various activities to mentor Muslim youth and construct "community" conflated with "brotherhood." According to the website (I use a pseudonym and maintain confidentiality by not giving the name of the website), they define "Punnam" as:

"The actual name of [Punnam] was taken from Surat al Rahman. It means precious gems [sic] or jewels...The idea was symbolic in naming our youth group [Punnam]. For it signified the existence of precious jewels or pearls that lay hidden, yet only need to be searched for to be realized. This is how we view the youth in today's Muslim Ummah."

In this instance, the idea of "jewels" and "gems" treasured in this instance consists of young men, there is a value put on the bodies of young Muslim men. Furthermore the organization states its mission as:

"The goal of [Punnam] is simple; to create a *brotherhood* around the teaching of Islam with Quran and Sunnah as our core, for the betterment of our lives as well as for the betterment of society... Inshallah, with the guidance from Allah (swt), we can create a sense of Islamic awareness within the Muslim youth to help them realize that they are indeed the crux of our religion, and that with the youth the beauties of Islam spread fourteen hundred years ago, and that now, with the youth, that same beauty can be spread across the modern times of the 21st century."

Accordingly, the explicit association of "Ummah" and "Muslim youth" with young Muslim men produces exclusions by cementing heteronormativity and patriarchy within the Muslim South Asian American community. The discourse on "brotherhood" stands in, as Sharif's interview demonstrates, for a heterosexual masculinity that also excludes women. Therefore, I contend that the opportunities for

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<sup>14</sup> This is also a pseudonym.

“brotherhood” and “Americanisation” provide foreclosed vistas for expressions of Muslim American-ness.

The structuring of the tournament reflected the character of “American-ness”, Muslim-ness, and masculinity at play in this sporting space and its subsequent exclusions. The vignette below details the August 15<sup>th</sup>, 2009, 3-on-3 Muslim tournament:

*With the blistering Atlanta summer heat scorching the pavement outside the gym, the energy, competitiveness, and sporting passions of the young Muslim men heated up the indoor court. Instead of celebrating Pakistani Independence Day and Indian Independence Day—August 14<sup>th</sup> and August 15<sup>th</sup> respectively—at various festivals across Atlanta, these South Asian American youth gathered to play basketball which indexed their American-ness that also posed a generational difference from their parents. Beside them and with these young South Asian American men were African Muslims, African American Muslims, Latino Muslims, and Middle Eastern Muslims. At the gym, Punnam tournament organizers, South Asian Americans ranging in age from early twenties to late forties, divided the young Muslim male population into two age groups—one of high school and younger group and the other of adults in college or older. Young South Asian American Muslim men patrolled the courts with a whistle in hand to officiate the various games, to keep game scores, and to document the tournament through photos.*

*Sanjeet, a Sikh American, played for one of the adult Muslim teams but also plays in the more competitive South Asian American basketball scene. Atlanta Outcasts and Atlanta Rat Pack did not play in this tournament. When inquiring into their absence, Sanjeet replied, “Imran [Atlanta Rat Pack] said this tournament is weak, they won’t play in this. The refs are horrible and they don’t call anything. I am here because my friends [Muslim South Asian Americans] asked me play. I really<sup>15</sup> want a trophy.” Sanjeet’s explanation of Imran’s and Mustafa’s absence rings similar to Max’s reasons to play in South Asian American basketball publics outside of their institution. As a South Asian American, Sanjeet entered this Muslim space freely and no one questioned his membership. I sat on the cold steel bleachers with Sanjeet and his teammates as they discussed the gamut of players at the tournament and who would provide them the greatest competition.*

*I observed the interactions on the court and took note of the bodily comportments. In addition to baggy basketball shorts hanging below the knee, sleeveless t-shirts, basketball shoes, and hyper-masculine team names such as “Killaz” and “Tenacious,” other expressions of a Muslim identity materialized in this space not seen in other basketball spaces. For example, one African Muslim and a South Asian American Muslim performed basketball aesthetics while layering such practices with Muslim sensibilities and Muslim respectabilities. The African player played in jogging pants inside the gym while a blistering, muggy August Atlanta heat awaited players outside the gym. Similarly, a South Asian American player wore a full length burqa-like religious outfit consisting of a long sleeved shirt down to his knees and baggy pants. Instead of representing “matter out of place” (ibid), these two men moved seamlessly through the social fabric of this basketball site.*

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<sup>15</sup> Sanjeet’s emphasis.

These expressive practices gathered momentum while explicitly collapsing poles of Muslim-ness and American-ness that are often painted as irreconcilable in the US imaginary. Such cultural practices of ethno-religious garb at basketball events complicate how basketball and American-ness are imagined. The particular social interactions, through a Muslim “heritage economy” (Afzal 2006), underscores a social phenomenon that is very American in nature. Muslim men of various persuasions rearticulate the meanings of this physical venue for basketball with basketball meanings around Muslim respectability and American-ness. Instead of seeing this basketball space as defined only by particular garb and linguistic codes, contrapuntal items such as burqas, speaking of Urdu, spoken African languages, English vernacular, and basketball garb co-exist to produce the particularity of this American-ness. Through heightened basketball competition and social intimacy facilitated by the masjid and Punnam, the young men re-define this public space thereby conflating Muslim-ness, masculinity, heterosexism, and American-ness.

There also exist various forms of surveillance in this space through the bodies of the organizers, South Asian American men. Moments of basketball play for the young Muslim men present opportunities for spiritual training and particular kinds of discipline. One of my Sikh American<sup>16</sup> subjects, Sanjeet, underscored this spiritual training taking place during a mandatory interval to the tournament. During a break between games, two Muslim community elders at the tournament, according to Sanjeet, gathered the young men to talk about Islam as well as proper “Muslim masculinity” through basketball analogies. This is what Sanjeet, playing on one of the teams, thought about the events that followed:

*“I missed the first part of the prayer's...[sic] i got there late but basically from what [Abhijeet] told me they had lunch which was provided by them, and then they went inside, [sic] the Imam( I think that's how you spell it) came and started praying...[sic]which was fine but then he went on and started talking about what is a good Muslim, why is Islam such a good religion and what does life mean in Islam. Most of the player's sat there and listened. He talked for a good 45mins or so.”*

As basketball can be appropriated to underscore American-ness, this expression is also policed by adults to suit their own interests. Furthermore, the Muslim elders take this opportunity to represent American-ness that is also a specifically managed Muslim-ness. These forms of discipline and surveillance are creatively weaved into South Asian American appropriation of basketball cultural practices.

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<sup>16</sup> Sikhs are an ethno-religious minority who were persecuted in India and there is a large Sikh diaspora in Canada and the US. There is a Sikh presence in Atlanta with five different Sikh places of worship (Gurdwaras).

As I observed these acts of policing, I noted an important absence during the course of this tournament. Over the course of the day long tournament, only two African American women made an appearance at the gym—these two women came to watch their African American friends play. Young South Asian American women did not have a site for basketball play available here; in addition, South Asian American women could not come to spectate and socialize. There is a policing of the “legitimate kinds of bodies” (Muller 2007) by roving South Asian American men—who serve as panoptic technologies—thereby making sport, nation, and diaspora battle ground for “symbolic masculine legitimacy” (Brown 2006). South Asian elders provided, at this tournament, opportunities for basketball pleasures alongside spiritual training for Muslim *men*. Women cannot claim “American-ness” and modernity through such means but, rather, South Asian American women are asked to represent South Asian tradition, culture, and purity (Gopinath 2005).

### **Indo-Pak Basketball as Institution and as Exclusion**

Accordingly, South Asian American men in my study reference only men as their basketball heroes thereby normalizing men both in nation and sport. The Indo-Pak Basketball websites and face-to-face conversations with players foreground one particular South Asian hero—Parambir. Parambir played Division I collegiate basketball, played for the Canadian Youth Basketball team, and is from Vancouver. Unlike African-American heroes, Parambir’s visibility in Indo-Pak Basketball defines him as an accessible hero. As a former collegiate women’s basketball coach myself, I knew of Madeleine Venkatesh as a collegiate women’s basketball coach in Atlanta but also knew of her own athletic collegiate career. I wondered about her invisibility in Indo-Pak Basketball’s institutional conversations.

The same conversations that celebrate Parambir do not point to Madeleine Venkatesh—she played Division I collegiate basketball and holds various records, she is left out of these celebratory discourses. When I asked Ali about his thoughts about female basketball players and the Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA), he replied, ““Basketball is physical. I don’t think basketball is a women’s sport, I hate the WNBA. I hated it when they act masculine. Chest bumps, tattoos, pounding the chest, and the gear are masculine and childish. They are butch.” Discourses of this sort point to the convention of such cultural practices by men but their abnormality when embodied by women.

Furthermore, femininity is constructed by Ali along narrow parameters—feminine presence in basketball is articulated by Ali as an abnormal femininity, thus placing it outside a normative femininity. Discourses, such as those of Ali, are common-place in sporting cultures. Sexualizing female basketball players as “butch”, according to Carrington, “devalues their sporting achievements” (Carrington 2002, p. 12). Thus, athletes such as Venkatesh are produced as “lesbian”—this is itself an act of policing these bodies and

makes membership in nation and the diaspora subject to gender and sexual orientation—the diaspora and nation exile their queers (Gopinath 2005).

Thus, the stigma of “butch” limits female participation in basketball but also limits the productions of such social opportunities. For example, Indo-Pak players stressed the need to get young men into basketball while their daughters, sisters, and wives stayed off the courts and could reside only in the stands. Indo-Pak Basketball organizers in Chicago materialized the anxiety of not having enough boys in the league through the creation of two tournaments at the 2008 Chicago IPN—adult Indo-Pak tournament and an under-18 years old youth tournament. Thus, it normalized young men in basketball; there was not the same concern for involving young women in basketball practices and in providing full membership to this cultural community. Madeleine Venkatesh, a former Division I collegiate basketball player in the US and college women’s basketball coach, discussed her own anxiety when asking her parents whether she could play basketball; she intimated that her older brother had no such worries. Juxtaposing her own ambivalence with asking her parents to play basketball while her older brother had no such problems, Madeleine highlighted the gendered, sexualized nature of women in basketball as she pointed to the prevalence of South Asian American women in tennis, which is gendered and sexualized differently as feminine.<sup>17</sup> Madeleine Venkatesh said, “I only met two Indian girls from playing and recruiting for 15 years.”

When prodded further about what kinds of stereotypes limit South Asian American women from participating in basketball, Madeleine used the case of her own mother. She stated, “My mom was very subservient to my dad. My mom’s life revolved around her three kids, no hobbies of her own. Her own desires took back seat to family.” This, a South Asian femininity, was in counterpoint to what Madeleine stated as the necessary traits to succeed in sport, “In order to participate you need to be assertive...cannot be meek or weak...need to take control...not sure how much of it is culture and how much is my own family.” With examples of her mom as symbolic of South Asian femininity, Madeleine also locates herself differently because of her love for basketball. She says, “I was not a ‘good Indian,’ I was not a typical Indian.”<sup>18</sup> A good citizen in the nation (US) and in the diaspora is articulated, in a cultural and normative sense, through a tough, aggressive, sporting masculinity in relation to a traditional, passive, domestic femininity. Therefore, as South Asian American institutions continue to complicate American-

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<sup>17</sup> The production of South Asian American femininities make impossible the queer female South Asian subject (Gopinath 2005).

<sup>18</sup> Madeleine emphasized that she did not socialize with other South Asian Americans other than her older and younger brother in addition to her parents. She also mentioned that she interacted with whites in many spaces while with African Americans in mostly sporting spaces.

ness through sporting practices, they simultaneously limit the nature of the articulation of American-ness and foreclose it to women and queers.

## **Conclusion**

Popular culture presents a paradigm by which to understand an active engagement between communities of color and mainstream US society. Sport, therefore, underscores not only identity formation among South Asian American men through hyper-masculine figures like Michael Jordan but also how such basketball practices expand, disrupt, manage, and reconfigure simultaneously the US and South Asian America. Whereas cultural centers (Rudrappa 2004), religious institutions (Joshi 2006), places of work (Dhingra 2007), and collegiate social organizations (Maira 2002) play instrumental roles in identity formation, sport is implicated at these various institutions and occupies an important place in South Asian America. Immersion into basketball play and basketball popular culture facilitated various South Asian American cultural practices and sensibilities. However, fields of power also emerge in these moments of pleasure and desire in basketball (Farred 2005; George 1992). In particular, the engagement with popular culture—basketball—has taken place through heterosexual norms thereby limiting opportunities of engagement with South Asian American queer communities as well as South Asian American women. To conclude, whereas the delve into popular culture in the lives of South Asian Americans often emphasizes “Bollywood” and “bhangra/dance party scene,” my research situates sporting spaces as a part of the cultural fabric of some South Asian American communities. Sporting spaces of basketball also give valuable information to the performance, materialization, and construction of American-ness at the intersection of race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality. Furthermore, this research project adds to the literature on Asian American popular culture by inserting basketball practices of South Asian Americans to understand how “American-ness” is appropriated and constructed by subjects otherwise produced as problematic, abject subjects in the US imagination. As such, I add to the literature dealing with second generation South Asian Americans (Dhingra 2007; Maira 2002; Purkayastha 2005) and I demonstrate how young South Asian American men articulate cultural citizenship through consumptive practices of sport. Finally, research on sport in the US has only begun to study critically how ethnic American communities and their cultural practices of sport inform identity formation—my research complicates and adds to this literature.

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