

INTERSECTIONS RADIO

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TRANSCRIPT

SARIKA MEHTA: You are listening to KXRY Portland on 107.1 FM, 91.1 FM, and streaming online at XRAY.fm. I'm Sarika Mehta. Welcome to Intersections Radio, a new independent podcast, which also airs on XRAY. Intersections Radio is the show where we geek out on all things intersectionality.

Today's episode features the intersection of South Asian American history with Black History Month. I have two guests, an activist couple from the San Francisco bay area, Anirvan Chatterjee and Barnali Ghosh. They're the masterminds behind two innovative projects that unite our communities' histories.

First, Anirvan talks about his website, Black Desi Secret History, showcasing collaborative activism of black history and South Asian history over the past century. Most people are aware that Martin Luther King found inspiration in Mahatma Gandhi's teachings. But Anirvan documents more stories and surprising connections on this site. Check out the site at BlackDesiSecretHistory.org.

Next, Anirvan and Barnali talk about founding the Berkeley South Asian Radical History Walking Tour. This tour started with an aim to recognize South Asian history within Berkeley's history. And in fact, this tour has allowed for South Asian Americans to have deeper conversations about activism. You can learn more about the tour at BerkeleySouthAsian.org.

This is Intersections Radio.

Thank you both so much for joining me on Intersections Radio. And, I want to talk about some of the projects you both do together, which include the Black Desi Secret History, and the Berkeley South Asian Radical History Walking Tour. Let's start with the Black Desi Secret History Tumblr Project for a bit. First, tell me about, you know, the genesis of this project. Because, frankly, these stories are not well known.

ANIRVAN CHATTERJEE: Hi. This is Anirvan. I grew up in the San Francisco bay area, and growing up South Asian, growing up in a Desi family, I didn't actually understand that we had much of anything in common with African America, I didn't really realize that we had really kind of any meaningful points of intersection. So it came as a really big surprise to me that, not only are our histories deeply connected, but they're really intimately connected, to the point where, knowing some of this history now, I think I'd argue that African America actually helped create South Asian America as we know it.

So, for me it was really important to try to figure out ways to tell some of these stories in a way that was a little bit more accessible, not just talking history books. So, that's where the Black Desi Secret History Tumblr Project came from, really kind of a way of making some of these shared legacies more accessible, using kind of visuals and story telling.

SARIKA MEHTA: So, what are some of those stories that you've uncovered that unite and, unite our two communities, but I guess really, our community's history as a product of African American history?

ANIRVAN CHATTERJEE: So, my very favorite story that I discovered while working on the Black

Desi Secret History Project is the story of Bayard Rustin. And, Bayard Rustin is an African American, gay, civil rights activist. A lot of people might know him because he was one of the core organizers behind Martin Luther King's 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Justice. But, what a lot of people don't necessarily know is that Bayard Rustin is also somebody who's actually been really deeply committed to South Asian liberation and South Asian liberation movements. In the 1940s, he was involved in a protest, and some kinds of direct action, against the British, fighting for Indian independence. He went to India in 1949 to learn about Gandhian tactics, and he went back again to help plan MLK's 1959 trip to India. And again, back to Pakistan on that visit, and then -- in '49, and then again many, many decades later.

And just the idea that this black, gay, radical activist has been fighting with us, alongside us, for our independence, and for our liberation, and we didn't even know about it? I mean, it -- like, for me, like, it just really kind of messes with my conception of what a Desi freedom fighter looks like, that a black gay man can be a Desi freedom fighter. And for me, that's really kind of changed my, the way I think about black Desi solidarity, it's not just kind of a one way thing of South Asian leftists talking about that today as some kind of a theoretical thing, black Desi solidarity, solidarity is something that's just been around for a very long time, and we're stepping into a long, continuing stream.

SARIKA MEHTA: I'm so glad you brought up Bayard Rustin, because, and I think I told you this over email correspondence, that some of the works that he read were by a scholar named Krishnalal Shridharani, and Krishnalal Shridharani as it turns out is my grandmother's paternal uncle, which is four generations removed, granted, but I was -- I only found this out a few weeks ago, when I was in California visiting, and I was just floored to have an actual familial connection to the civil rights movement. I mean, it was, it's incredible to see it from one side with Bayard Rustin and then from this other, very personal side, so I'm so glad you brought him up.

ANIRVAN CHATTERJEE: We've also heard stories on the other end, from Desi activists here in North America who have family stories of their family members meeting Bayard Rustin in Bengal, in Chandanidanga, in 1949. So, I mean, I think once we started looking for them, the connections are really there.

SARIKA MEHTA: Absolutely. And, well besides my very personal "Oh my god," cheering you on kind of response, tell me about the community response to your tumblr site, and the kind of support you've had in this venture.

ANIRVAN CHATTERJEE: The response has been really surprising -- surprisingly positive. I think, growing up and living in South Asian America, I think a lot of South Asian Americans have this sense that we are not in solidarity with African America, a lot of folks in our community, we've heard stories of either racism or different kinds of, sort of, kind of, really kind of complicated, problematic attitudes around blackness in our communities. So, we know that we are not in solidarity. It's actually kind of a surprise that we can be in solidarity, and that there's a long tradition of that. It's actually, I think, really hard to visualize what that would look like for a lot of people.

And I think the thing that the Black Desi Secret History Project is really aimed at doing is making it obvious that, you know, even if you haven't seen this, even if I haven't seen this in my lifetime, in the communities around this, that these solidarities exist, and that they're really meaningful, I mean, whether that's South Asians participating in the civil rights movement, or even somebody who a lot of Hindu Americans really look to, like Swami Vivekananda, who, when he was here in the 1890s and 1900s, came in with some really problematic, sort of anti-black sentiment, but then, when he left the

United States, he, you know, he actually was changed a little bit, but when he was sort of mistaken for African American and was sort of exposed to some of that kind of racialization, you know -- so there's this long history of South Asians and African Americans sort of like finding each other in interesting ways.

I think the thing that's been really useful is seeing how these stories can be used as part of a much larger movement. We've been seeing some of the stories from the Black Desi Secret History Project, I mean, certain, like, either as part of the project or by themselves, getting used in anti-racist curricula, getting used in difficult conversations with family members. It's really been sort of useful. I mean, it's been helpful to know that we're building on something much bigger.

SARIKA MEHTA: That's really great that it's been used in different curricula and things like that. I was curious, what is the first Black Desi Secret History story that led you to creating this site, or what, was it the Bayard Rustin story, or was it something else?

ANIRVAN CHATTERJEE: Bayard Rustin was definitely one of them. I mean, I think I grew up hearing stories of Gandhi and King, and as -- pretty much the only connection that folks in my community knew of South Asian and African American political solidarities, and just the idea that the American civil rights movement built on the legacy of Gandhi. And, that's fine, and that's important, and certainly for me growing up, it was an important sort of starting point. But there's just been so much more than that, and I think every single time I started reading a little bit more South Asian American history, and I started finding, like, just little tiny bits and pieces of the stuff, whether that's learning the story of Dalit Panther, which is Maharashtra, India. Dalit are untouchable, sort of a, kind of, sort of a radical political movement that was inspired by the Black Panthers.

Or, for that matter, learning the stories of folks like Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, who was here in the early part of the century, and was really involved in trying to connect with different African American activists in the south when she was here. I mean, I think there's just these long histories, and every time I would come across one of these, it would really kind of blow apart my idea that Gandhi and King are the only things we know, and it's -- I think it's really important to kind of go beyond that, like, one initial kind of point of contact that everybody seems to know.

SARIKA MEHTA: Definitely, and I think this is a good segue to talk about your other projects that the two of you have together, the Berkeley South Asian Radical History Walking Tour. Maybe, Barnali, you can talk to us about this project. Again, how did this start and how did you, how did you make this happen?

BARNALI GHOSH: Thank you for having us on the show. And I want to also just quickly say that one of the most powerful stories for me out of the Black Desi Secret History stories that we have is the one that really speaks to how South Asian America exists. And the fact that it would not have existed without the civil rights movement. And I think for me, as an immigrant who moved here from India, it's been about 16 years ago, I never thought that I -- firstly, that I owed anybody anything for being here, but also that if I did, that it was to the US as a country. And when Anirvan started working on this project and we were looking and trying to understand what happened in 1965, when the gates to immigration were really opened up for people from countries in South Asia, we recognized that it was pressure from the civil rights movement that changed a lot of racist laws, including the immigration law of 1965.

And if it wasn't for the sacrifices and really the bloodshed and the direct action and all of that activism

that came out of the civil rights movement, somebody like me wouldn't even be here. And I think that's, it was -- that was really important for me to ground myself in the US, and understand what the history of my being here even is. So, I just -- so, put that out there, that folks should really think about who we are indebted to for our presence here as South Asian Americans, and that we owe a huge debt to black activists and it's time for us to pay it back.

Anyway. Coming back to the walking tour, so we started the walking tour about three and a half years ago now, so we started working on it maybe four years ago. Really thinking about ways in which we, as activists, as, you know, being part of the activist community here, and again, hearing bits and pieces of these stories from older activists, feeling like, wow, you know, there are a lot of organizers and activists that come out of the South Asian community, yet you don't hear their stories. So, we started thinking about what ways we could share these stories. We tried, you know, finally we tried telling a lot of these stories as we discovered them. I joke, but it's true, we would get very excited about these stories and try to share them with friends over dinner, and would not get the reaction we expected. And so we thought, we really need to come up with a creative way to make sure that the power of these stories is acknowledged in the way we tell them, and in the reaction that people have to them.

So, we have a lot of stories here, right here in Berkeley, and I think Anirvan and I both love walking, and both really love the city of Berkeley, but yet, when we would walk the streets of Berkeley, it's not easily apparent to us that any of these stories exist. There are no plaques, there are no signs, there's nothing to indicate that our presence in the city has been for over a hundred years, and that presence has been connected to struggles for justice. So by doing the walking tour, by doing it in a place based way, which means that we actually take people to the places that these stories occurred, we sort of re-imagine for people what the city looked like, if you're an organizer and activist. So the next time you're walking on the streets of Berkeley, the next time you're walking by these places, you will think of the city of Berkeley very differently. So, that's just a little bit of, I guess, of context for why we do it the way we do.

SARIKA MEHTA: And what are some of the important points along the tour, who are some of the people and the places that you highlight?

BARNALI GHOSH: So, we have a collection of many stories, over a dozen or more stories, and on this version of the walking tour that we've been doing for about three and a half years, we talk about six stories that we tell, and these include stories of LGBT activists, feminists, freedom fighters, youth activists post-911, so a whole range of stories that spans the hundred year history that we know of. Anirvan, do you want to speak a little more to any of the specific stories?

ANIRVAN CHATTERJEE: Sure. It came as a surprise to us that South Asian activism has been really visible in the city of Berkeley for much longer than we thought. When I first moved to Berkeley, which is a small college town near San Francisco in the 1990s, I knew that Berkeley was a city that had a radical history, and so much of that was really wrapped up in what was happening in Berkeley with primarily white students in the 1960s. But we uncovered the story of the very first South Asian protest in the city of Berkeley, which happened all the way back in 1908. And just knowing that the, pretty much the entire South Asian student community at the University of California-Berkeley came out for an anti-racist protest half a century before the Free Speech Movement. It really kind of changes our idea of what Berkeley activism looks like, of what our community is capable of.

There was a time, relatively recently, when we were able to team up with several Black Panthers veterans who do kind of a joint tour of South Asian radical history in Berkeley along with Black

Panthers history. And I love the fact that all the stories we were telling were actually much older than the stories of the Panthers. So the Panthers were telling the modern stories, and we were telling the older stories. We are, many of us are relatively recent immigrants, but our stories reach much further into the past than only post-1965.

SARIKA MEHTA: That is very cool. And, it's just interesting for me to picture this, and I am an outsider to California, but my understanding of at least the South Asian community, well, pretty much all communities in the bay area, especially in the east bay, it's -- which includes Berkeley and Fremont, and all in between, and Oakland. These are, these tend to be segregated communities, like most major cities. I'm curious how have people responded when you take them on this tour?

BARNALI GHOSH: So, over the last three or three and a half years that we have been doing the walking tour, we've had over 1200 people come on the walking tour. And they've, the audience has been mixed. Initially, they were mostly South Asians. We had a lot of activists, South Asian activists coming on the tour, and we were really surprised by their reaction to hearing these stories, because we thought, oh, we're talking about, you know, their world. But what they really appreciated was finding out that there was a long tradition that they were building on. Very often, South Asian activists have to be different people, depending on where they are. If they're going to a family wedding, they're one kind of person. If they're at work, or at a protest, they're a different kind of person. And by telling these stories, we were kind of make -- you know, making those, what seemed like disparate identities - that if you're South Asian you can be an organizer - sort of come together.

And many of these folks would also bring their parents, or brothers or sisters, with whom they couldn't always have these conversations, to the walking tour. And we would, you know, we would be the ones that are telling these stories, and we hope that at the end of the walking tour, they would go away and have it be easier for them to discuss some of the things that they were fighting for in their organizing lives.

So, that was a surprising reaction, and also made us feel really warm and fuzzy inside, because these are our people, and now we often say that our walking tour, at the end of it, you should hug an activist, or you should hug an organizer. And that's part of how you should leave.

We've had folks come from Vallejo, from San Jose, like, really far out cities, not just, you know, Berkeley, Oakland, and San Francisco, the big cities that we think about. Some of them come because there isn't a South Asian history tour, there's only the South Asian Radical History Walking Tour. Many people will come not really knowing what radical means, in our context it really means we're talking about organizing histories. And, we've been surprised at the support we've got from those folks, especially. Folks who came in, not, you know, we talk about freedom fighters. I think when we're talking about freedom fighters in Berkeley, and we're also following up with LGBT history, we're bringing people in who come for different things, but go away hearing about topics that are not always addressed in the same space.

And by doing it as part of, like, one big piece of story-telling, like the six stories, they're not just separate stories, there's common themes that run through them. We're really sort of challenging people to think beyond on some of the issues that might be uncomfortable to them.

And, I think lately, we've also had a lot of Asian American activists and South Asians are part of that, but a lot of East Asian activists, API groups that have come on the tour, and I think that has really shown us that these stories, sort of, it goes beyond just the South Asian identity, that the stories of many

of these activists can inspire us, even if we are not South Asian. And we're often forced to tell it under the umbrella, or define it, as South Asian, but really, these stories are inspiring to anybody who's interested in California history and Berkeley history, and the history of our struggles and how we come to have some of the privileges we take for granted today.

ANIRVAN CHATTERJEE: We definitely see history as a way to start talking about some of these kind of much larger political issues that are kind of hard to talk about. I think people are really open to hearing stories about history in a way that maybe wouldn't, like, listen to a political lecture, or they wouldn't, like, go to a certain kind of discussion. So, it's been really useful for us to be able to sort of get at the present by talking about the past. We're really focused on being accessible. There's a lot of information stuck in books, stuck in, you know, just, lectures, stuck in sort of other kinds of media that just -- you can't just kind of walk in and show up and access.

So we've been using a lot of story telling, a lot of visuals, we use street theater. We're trying to use as many different techniques as possible to help bring these stories alive. And that's been really effective, where we found, especially the Youth History Theater, it really kind of changes how people sort of relate to somebody's stories. People will come in, maybe thinking about South Asian freedom fighters, but they'll leave sort of having learned something about intersectional feminism or post-911 Islamophobia or brown phobia, and that's -- there's something really useful about that.

I think something else that kind of has been interesting for us is sort of using the lens of history. Because sometimes when we think about history, we think about, only about the deep past, and when we do our tour, we do tell stories that are, you know, over a hundred years ago. But not a lot of people necessarily might think of, say post-911 stories as being history, per se, but the very first time we did the tour was for a group of folks who were as young as 15, and for them, post-911 histories are kind of like history, where it's not something that they, that immediate post-911 moment isn't something that they themselves experienced. And being able to just sort of frame some of these stories using that history lens has been really helpful. It makes people who are, who would maybe be a little bit more skeptical, a little bit more open, and it also lets us do more storytelling as a way of sort of getting at these bigger issues.

BARNALI GHOSH: And I think one of the other reactions that we've had, and which we expected though, was the stories that people share in return, or in response. You know, sort of like you just shared about, was it your uncle, that you said?

SARIKA MEHTA: It was, it's my grandmother's uncle, so it's --

BARNALI GHOSH: Grandmother's, yeah. Many years ago. You know, those kind of things are, we need spaces for people to share both things like that, and also like when we do the 911 story, for many people it's the first time that they've shared their experience of being at the other end of racist abuses. They've never had the space to actually talk about that before we've asked them in that, on the walking tour. And that is very powerful for other people who are on the tour, to sort of bear witness to that, and for the person who is sharing the story, to feel like they're not alone in this, and that they didn't just sort of make it up in their heads, that they did experience it as did other people that we're telling the stories of, and to have other people there sort of recognize it as a real thing.

And I think that's even more important because often, in the Berkeley bay area, we think of ourselves as more liberal, more open minded, but those kind of things still happen here, and you know, constant vigilance by the community is needed to not have it happen. So it brings us to that reality as well.

SARIKA MEHTA: I really appreciate the points you both brought up, especially connecting what happens in the present to these histories, whether they're recent histories or far off histories. It's all very important. I was actually curious, on a related note, you had mentioned that, you know, people will take this tour and it sort of opens up a space to have a discussion at home -- or, let me back up. You were saying that we, as South Asians, you know, we're one person when we go to a family wedding, we're a different person when we're an activist, and things like that. I had to keep myself from laughing out loud because it's completely true, and so your tour offers, you know, kind of, meshing the, all of these identities into one person, and having a space to talk about these issues in our private lives, maybe with our families and things like that. I was curious if you have any responses from folks who've taken your tour and have had an opportunity to talk about these seemingly difficult issues at home.

ANIRVAN CHATTERJEE: One of the stories that I've, I keep hearing from young people on our tour is the fact that they didn't know that their parents knew so much. And I mean, some of that just comes from being young, and thinking you know everything. But, we've seen a lot of situations where, as people sort of go through the tour together as a family, it's unsurprising the older folks, who'll actually have engaged in some way with these histories, or it will be part of their shared history or it's part of the world that they grew up in, and we've really kind of seen sort of conversations open up within a family, you know, around like, dad, I didn't know that you knew about anti-emergency activism of the 1970s, or, you know, or whatever else, or, you know, why didn't you tell me about blah blah blah, about the [unintelligible].

And, I think that it really changes the dynamic a little bit, where, because we're telling South Asian American histories, we're actually sort of creating a space where potentially anybody within a family can be sort of the expert on it, and it doesn't actually have to be the sort of American-born generation, or the folks who've been living here longer, who know more than others. We've definitely heard stories of people going home and having conversations about, for example, the jobs that they do, if somebody chooses to be an activist or an organizer full time, and how being able to ground that in a hundred year old tradition, as opposed to like it's that weird thing that my kid does. It really helps kind of change the framing of that a little bit.

SARIKA MEHTA: Absolutely. Between these two projects, the Black Desi Secret History and the Berkeley South Asian Radical History Walking Tour, do you have goals or do you have hopes that, you know, you want to achieve, or what do you hope to see in the present and in the future?

ANIRVAN CHATTERJEE: So, there are about four million South Asian Americans right now, or people of South Asian descent in the United States, and most of us are post-1965 immigrants, and so we're still kind of figuring out who we are and how we kind of fit into this place, and how we relate to each other, given that we come from so many different, like, nationalities, and language groups, and religions. We're really interested in seeing us sort of come up with a kind of more complex idea of who we are as South Asian America, and a key piece of that is actually understanding all of our history, including these, the radical histories that we touch on on our tour.

I think it's really important for us to go beyond defining ourselves only under, say, model minority stereotypes, where the story of, say, South Asian America is bigger than doctors or lawyers and engineers. I mean, for me growing up in the bay area, it felt like my tradition was all about being that perfect model minority. But the more we've learned these stories, I think, the more it shows us that we have a really different kind of heritage. Because for over a century, people who look like us, people who speak our languages, they've been walking the streets of, in our case Berkeley, and they've been

working for justice, and that's part of our heritage too, which means that every time there's some South Asian kid who speaks out against a homophobic joke, or every time there are South Asians who are fighting economic inequality or working for climate justice, they're, they are actually celebrating our community's, one of our community's very oldest traditions, our tradition of resistance to injustice.

And, that's something that's bigger than just a walking tour. We want to be part of a much larger movement that's helping our whole community sort of understand who we are, how we got here, and if we know our own history, we're hoping that might change some of the choices we make and how we relate to others here in the United States.

SARIKA MEHTA: Anirvan and Barnali, thank you so much for taking the time to chat with me for Intersections Radio, and this was very powerful, and I look forward to when I can get back to the bay area and do the walking tour with you guys.

BARNALI GHOSH: Looking forward to having you on it.

ANIRVAN CHATTERJEE: Thanks so much.

SARIKA MEHTA: That was Anirvan Chatterjee and Barnali Ghosh, the activist couple behind Black Desi Secret History and the Berkeley South Asian Radical History Walking Tour. Again, check out the websites, at BlackDesiSecretHistory.org, and book your next tour at BerkeleySouthAsian.org.

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