



INDIAN AMERICAN

Podcast charts a different path for South Asians



SOUTH ASIAN STORIES

Graphic courtesy South Asian Stories

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By Shruti Rajkumar, AsAmNews Staff Writer

Sameer Desai always thought about going down a path that deviated from conventional South Asian careers. A few years ago, he began looking for South Asian podcasts that focused on this topic, and when he couldn't find anything out there at the time, he decided to create one himself.

In 2018, Desai founded one of the first South Asian-centered interview style podcasts called *South Asian Stories* with the goal of telling

^ w there are people that are interested.”

Media Lead at *South Asian Stories*, Meera Tikku, joined the podcast team as a social media intern in spring 2021. This was around the same time that she was breaking the news to her parents that she needed an extra year of school, which prompted questions and comments about how she was delaying her career.

“I was like, ‘Am I doing the right thing?’ I was feeling very lost in terms of [my] career. And then connecting with [Desai], it was like, ‘Oh, okay, wait, I am good at this. There is a market out there, people are wanting to hear these types of stories.’ It made me feel at home. These are my types of people who are doing unconventional things [and] I’m not alone. It’s been very inspiring to know that other people have done it and made it through on the other end,” Tikku said.

Within the South Asian community, Desai said that many in his parents’ generation came to the United States in hopes of a better life for themselves and their children, and as a result, they became very cognizant of risks. They want their kids to be successful, so they push them down traditional career paths that bring them money and stability, even if they’re not interested in those paths.

Suraj Kandukuri, the Producer of the podcast *Brown People We Know*, said that by increasing South Asian voices through podcasts such as *South Asian Stories*, external stereotypes about the community as well as the internal community pressures can be broken.

Kandukuri notes that in the past year especially, there’s been a huge increase in South Asian voices in podcasting since people had more time on their hands during the pandemic.

^ it's a huge testament to Sameer, that he's been doing this for three years," Kandukuri said.

While connecting with his peers who were starting podcasts, Desai said they all realized that they are not in direct competition with one another, and that they can amplify South Asian voices better together. In 2020, Kandukuri said he reached out to Desai because he wanted to learn from and connect with others as he created his podcast.

"During that process he and I kind of became friends. He's been super willing to provide guidance and compare notes, whether it's marketing or reaching out to guests. It's just really a testament to the work that he's doing. He built an awesome show with some really awesome guests, and in that process, he's also empowered other shows, which shows that he's really invested in boosting South Asian stories," Kandukuri said.

Kandukuri believes that what's missing the most in podcasting is the stories of South Asians who were raised in America. He deems Desai as having been a pioneer in the podcast space, as he has brought in household names as well as lesser known people within the diaspora who are going down non-traditional paths.

"Most of the times when we do hear or see ourselves in the media, [it] tends to be in the form of a recent immigrant or a stereotype. So the thing that I really like about Sameer's podcast is he's brought on people that are in careers that we don't normally see ourselves in, which I think opens the path for other people to take those career paths," Kandukuri said.



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When he first started South Asian Stories, Desai just wanted to have conversations with these people, even if he didn't receive any listeners. However over the past three years, the podcast has grown exponentially, reaching an audience of 30,000 listeners and bringing in over 30 high profile guests such as Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Mirthy. He hopes that exposure and mentorship is what people take away from the podcast.

"If you're a young person who's searching for people that are doing things that people in your individual circle [aren't] doing, [a podcast] provides you an intimate exposé to the people's stories. You get the richness of the stories, you get the trials and tribulations, you really get the emotion of what it took for people to get past things that may have prevented them in the past," Desai said.

Tikku said that being able to sit in on the podcast interviews has made it really accessible to connect with other people pursuing unconventional paths and hear their stories. An interview that hit home for her the most was with Romen Borsellino, who is a writer for *A Little Late With Lilly Singh*, and she had the opportunity to connect with him outside of the interview.

"He's had a really interesting background, so it's like 'Oh my god, how

^ sure,” said Tikku.

For the future of South Asian Stories, Desai said he hopes to keep bringing in guests that are excited to push the agenda and unafraid to tell their stories, and to keep telling a variation of stories.

“I hope to have more and more people listen to the podcast, [and] find at least one episode [that] resonates with you and get you excited to maybe think about something differently, or pass [it] on to someone who may be struggling [and] who’s looking for something like this. That would be my dream. I just appreciate all the support, and I’m grateful for everything that we’ve done so far. But I’m excited about where we can take this next,” Desai said.

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