

Highlights from the 2009 National South Asian Summit

April 24-26, 2009 /Washington DC

THE SUMMIT

- More than 200 people, representing 17 states around the country gathered in Washington DC for the 2009 National South Asian Summit.
- Co-sponsored by South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT) and the South Asian Law Students Association (SALSA) at the American University Washington College of Law, the second National South Asian Summit brought together activists, advocates, allies and community members for three days of advocacy, peer sharing, skills-building and more.
- The Summit enabled participants to bring local voices and experiences to the national level through roundtables with government agency representatives, a congressional briefing and visits to legislators.
- Members of the National Coalition of South Asian Organizations (founded in 2008 and coordinated by SAALT) met at the National South Asian Summit to continue peer exchanges, strategy development, and regional collaborations.

In three days, I got caught up and learned about new developments facing South Asians in the U.S. including education reform, domestic violence and language access. Taha Gaya, Pakistani American Leadership Center- Washington DC (pictured left)



ADVOCACY DAY

- The Summit included the first national coordinated effort for South Asian community members to meet with policymakers in Congress and government agencies in order to raise issues affecting the community through a progressive framework and to learn about the policy priorities of various government entities.
- Highlights included an assessment of the first 100 days of the Obama Administration; roundtables with several federal government agencies; briefings by White House and Congressional staff on the policy landscape for 2009; and Hill visits with Congressional staffers.
- Government agency roundtables included representatives from the Departments of Health and Human Services, Homeland Security, Housing and Urban Development, Justice, and the Office on Violence Against Women.
- Participants attended a briefing with key Congressional staff on Capitol Hill from the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus, Majority Leader Reid's Office, Speaker Pelosi's Office, and the House Subcommittee on Immigration. Through this briefing, participants learned about legislative momentum on issues affecting the community, including immigration, civil rights, and economic issues as well as feedback mechanisms in place in Congress to incorporate the perspectives of the South Asians in the United States.

It is very empowering to be able to directly interact, and form connections with these people who have the power to shape the policies that we all live by. Without something like advocacy day, many of us would never get the opportunity to do this...This is very powerful. Venkat Ramamoorthi, The College of New Jersey student (pictured left)



I have been able to meet a lot of people and gain a lot of tools in terms of raising the funds and building the sustainability that we need in order to be able to move forward and really launch our social justice activities off the ground. Aakash Kishore, Satrang-Los Angeles (pictured right)



I have admired [the work of advocates] for a long time and tracked them mostly electronically and to be able to meet them face to face and feel part of the progressive South Asian movement is really powerful. Uma Rao, Chaya-Seattle

- 20 delegations met with staffers from target Congressional offices to discuss civil rights and immigration reform. These offices included the Speaker’s Office, members of the Senate and House Immigration Subcommittees, as well as members of the Congressional Women’s Caucus and various South Asian caucuses. Other delegations met with their respective Representative or Senator from New Jersey, New York, Maryland, Virginia, Illinois, and California. During these meetings, community members highlighted the local impact of the broken immigration system and civil rights violations, and asked for Congressional support on various pieces of immigration and civil rights legislation (including the Child Citizenship Protection Act, the Reuniting Families Act, the Uniting American Families Act, the Immigration Oversight and Fairness Act, DREAM, the Local Law Enforcement Hate Crimes Prevention Act, and the End Racial Profiling Act).

WORKSHOPS AND SESSIONS

- The 2009 South Asian Summit included opportunities for issue-based discussions, strategy sessions, and skills-building workshops.
- Issue-based sessions included: *Impact of the Economic Crisis; This Is What Immigration Reform Looks Like; Towards Health Equity; Gender, Race and Sexuality; Building Mass-Based Organizations; Trends Affecting South Asian Students; and Opportunities for Fundraising in Challenging Times.*
- One of the most successful workshops during the Summit, based on participant feedback, was *Get Trained to Become a More Effective Spokesperson*. The result of a collaboration between SAALT and the SPIN Project, the workshops were customized for the South Asian audience. The training aimed to arm attendees with the skills and awareness to be effective spokespersons for their organization or cause. Each participant prepared a 60-second elevator speech, which some of the participants performed for the entire group. 45 individuals from more than 12 organizations participated in the sessions.
- This year marked the start of the **SAALT ChangeMaker Awards** – an opportunity to recognize individuals in the community who have catalyzed social change in their neighborhoods, workplaces, and campuses. Summit participants attended a reception honoring award recipients - *Muhammed Malik*, a grassroots organizer from Florida; *Sonia Sarkar*, a community health advocate in Baltimore; *Asm Rahman*, a local community leader in Michigan; and *Rishi Singh*, an immigrant youth organizer in New York City. Participants also heard keynote remarks from author and sociologist *Sudhir Venkatesh*.



It has been a great experience at the Summit especially getting to know that there are so many South Asian organizations working to help people and SAALT brought them together. Asm Rahman, SAALT ChangeMaker Award Recipient-Detroit (pictured left)



SAALT ChangeMaker Award recipients: (from left) Asm Rahman, Sudhir Venkatesh (keynote speaker), Sonia Sarkar, Rishi Singh and Muhammed Malik



There were over 200 participants here at the Summit so I got a chance to connect with a lot of organizations that do similar work or do work that could complement resources that we need for the women that we serve. Atashi Chakravarthy, Narika-San Francisco (pictured left)

MEDIA

SAALT executed a media outreach strategy targeting established community media outlets in the Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities as well as influential South Asian blogs. The strategy has been successful with at least 9 articles and blog posts published that feature the South Asian Summit.

SAALT also developed our own community media by using Flip videocameras to document the Summit. Our documentation led to the creation of *Summit Snapshots*, a series of video clips featured on SAALT's You Tube channel.

Moreover, ally and NCSO organizations such as National CAPACD, Sakhi for South Asian Women and Counselors Helping (South) Asians/Indians, as well as individual Summit participants, have reported their experiences at the Summit through blog posts and organizational newsletters.

Media Hits:

Activists Come Together to Address Community's Pressing Issues, [India Abroad](#) (May 22, 2009)

A Few Reflections on the South Asian Summit, [Sepia Mutiny](#) (April 27, 2009) (blog)

A Few Reflections on the South Asian Summit, [India Sphere](#) (April 28, 2009)

Hamtramck NAACP Picks Asian to Lead, [Detroit Free Press](#) (April 27, 2009) (featuring Asm Rahman, who received one of SAALT's 2009 Changemaker Awards at the Summit)

Me Too!, [Sepia Mutiny](#) (May 5, 2009) (blog)

SAALT South Asian Summit Builds Nationwide Alliance, [India West](#) (May 15, 2009)

South Asian Organizations and Community Members Gather in Capital to Advocate, Strategize and Build Alliance, [South Asian Times](#) (May 5, 2009)

South Asian Summit Amplifies Local Voices, [India Post](#) (May 1, 2009)

South Asians in US Meet to Discuss Recession, [NDTV.com](#) (April 29, 2009)

South Asians in US Meet to Discuss Recession, [KeralaNext.com](#) (April 30, 2009)

I'm going to take this back and share it with our members and I'm sure they will be excited to know that we are engaged with folks in Washington DC and ...that their voices are being heard at some level. Shilpen Patel, Trikone Northwest-Seattle (pictured left)



This summit provided an opportunity to continue the dialogue among progressive South Asians and to move the agenda forward. As we all know, in social justice work, we track progress over the course of decades. By that measure, this is an amazing achievement, in a relatively short time frame. SAALT has emerged as an important institution, both within the South Asian community, and within the broader progressive movement. Jayesh Rathod, SAALT Board Chair and American University Washington College of Law professor (pictured right)

Other Hits:

A Few More Reflections on the SAALT Summit, [South Asian Philanthropy Project](#) (April 29, 2009)

Live-Blogging SAALT Summit and Venu's Panel, [South Asian Philanthropy Project](#) (April 25, 2009)

Obama's DC, [RuFreeman.com](#) (April 26 2009)

South Asian Summit, [National CAPACD blog](#) (April 29, 2009)

Sakhi Leads Discussion at Key National Conference, [Sakhi Newsletter](#) (April 2009)

SAALT Summit and May News, [CHAI Newsletter](#) (April 2009)

Our Very Own Madhuri Mohindar Speaks at South Asian Summit, [Breakthrough blog](#) (May 18, 2009)



Making the connections between our organizations in person and acknowledging that 'my struggle is yours' has been inspirational. Sarah Rizvi, Chaya-Seattle



I plan on getting more civically involved with local government by setting up meetings, and working at that level to make policymakers aware of the issues the community is facing. Mona Belsare, Michigan Asian Indian Family Services (pictured left)

NEXT STEPS

We anticipate that next steps will differ depending on individual and organizational interests. At the Summit and in evaluations, a range of suggestions were offered such as:

- Continuing dialogues at the local level with policymakers
- Linking relevant government agencies with local organizations in outreach efforts and activities occurring in various parts of the country
- Coordinating future local advocacy trainings and in-district Congressional visits to foster local relationships and increase pressure from the field on federal policy issues
- Identifying ways to collaborate at the regional level
- Connecting resources and experts with community-based organizations
- Implementing a lawyer referral bank for South Asians
- Identifying opportunities for community education around Census 2010, immigration, and health equity issues

Six years ago, this space wasn't possible. We would have small convenings and gatherings. Finally, I'm in a place where I can find mentors in the South Asian community and I also see young people looking for role models. A space like this helps to put words to issues that we know are going on. Now I can go back to an API organization and be sure that I'm touching upon issues that affect South Asian communities. Tanzila "Taz" Ahmed, OCAPICA-Orange County, CA (pictured left)



SAALT will be connecting with Summit participants in the months to come in various ways, including community townhalls at the local level, national webinars, and opportunities for trainings and collaborations. We also plan on convening the third South Asian Summit in 2010.

I felt honored and privileged to spend the weekend in the company of such amazing people, and the experience made me deeply proud to be part of this community and a supporter of SAALT. I have come away feeling refreshed, my priorities in order, with renewed commitment to my work and a deeper sense of purpose. Sabrina Balgamwalla-American University Washington College of Law alum (pictured right)

