

Wanjara Nomad Collections: Academic Apartheid and the 3R Word: The Violence of the 'South Asian' Label



Gurdit Singh (centre) led the Guru Nanak Jahaz voyage as a Sikh initiative powered by Sikh spiritual resolve, and carried Punjabi political defiance. Jarnail Singh painting.

The Wanjara Nomad Collections wrote the following article in response to a [recent piece](#) in Broadview magazine.

This is where the problem begins: the 3R word 'South Asian.'

We say this with both precision and care: the unethical term "South Asian" is racist, reductive, and repressive. It is not an identity. It is a linguistic slur, an act of academic apartheid, a colonial euphemism institutionalized through Canadian multicultural policy, bureaucratic convenience, and scholarly habit. It also echoes what Dr. Joy DeGruy, in the context of racial trauma, calls [Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome](#): the inherited normalization of erasure as survival. It reflects what psychologists term identity foreclosure, when communities prematurely accept externally imposed labels without exploration, and echoes the cognitive dissonance produced when lived reality clashes with state-mandated identity frameworks.

This quote is widely attributed to Milan Kundera and echoes the themes of his novel, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1979), "The first step in liquidating a people is to erase its memory. Destroy its books, its culture, its history. Then have someone write new books, manufacture a new culture, invent a new history. Before long the nation will begin to forget what it is and what it was."

Once, we were called "[Hindoos](#)" in Canadian legislation. Then came [the label](#) "East Indians," a geographic misdirection. Then came the slur "Paki," weaponized on playgrounds and sidewalks. Then emerged "Indo Canadian," another flattened hybrid. Now comes yet another tsunami of misnaming: "South Asian." Each term, a fresh iteration of colonial categorization. Each, a betrayal dressed as belonging. Each, a name under which specificity is erased and identity annihilated.

The racist term "South Asian" is linguistic genocide, erasing identities and histories

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We ask, respectfully, ten questions to begin this conversation:

- Would we ever refer to respected Jewish Canadians as Middle Eastern Canadians in our census or heritage institutions?
- Is King Charles III (Charles Philip Arthur George) described in public discourse as a Western European monarch?
- Would we ever label British and French Canadians as Western European Canadians in our government reports or museum displays?
- Would Canada dare describe the Crown as a Western European remnant in political literature?
- Did we remember the Chinese Head Tax as an East Asian Tax in our national apologies?
- Do we speak of Japanese internment camps during WWII as East Asian camps?
- Would anyone reduce the histories of Ukrainians, Russians, and Finns to a shared Northern Eurasian heritage in public education?
- When India's Prime Minister visits Canada or attends [the G7](#), is he introduced as a South Asian leader or simply as the Prime Minister of India?
- When [Sikh organizations](#) protest [India's transnational aggression](#) policies, are they labelled as South Asian or as [Sikh Canadians](#) with grievances against India? ([Global News](#), [CBC](#), [National Post](#))
- Why is it only Canadian communities "Punjabis, Tamils, Afghans, Nepalis, Bengalis, Sikhs" who are expected to surrender our names in the name of vague solidarity?

We pose these questions to offer our fellow Canadians a mirror to reflect how they are identified in public discourse, so that they, too, may learn from this contrast and join us in demanding truthful naming.

The issue is not the individuals who use the term in good faith. Writers like Jeevan Sangha are deeply sincere, and we recognize the pain that animates her voice. Our concern is deeper. It is with the linguistic structure that frames our collective identities through imperial lenses. That structure teaches us to survive by calling ourselves what others once called us to control us.

It is not a critique of character or stance against racism and prejudice, but a dismantling of the epistemic architecture. What we at Wanjara Nomad Collections term linguistic Stockholm syndrome and academic apartheid. The term "[South Asian](#)" annihilates specificity. It muffles sovereignty. It erodes the integrity of cultural memory. It is a term with no linguistic, religious, or legal meaning, yet it is used to describe millions of Canadians as if it were neutral, even liberating.

The consequences are real. Grants are misdirected. Surveys are misframed. Museums, policy reports, and census forms continue to misname. The *Komagata Maru*, now rightly being [reclaimed](#) by the community as [the Guru Nanak Jahaz](#), is frequently boxed into "South Asian history" While it included Punjabis of Sikh, Muslim, and Hindu faiths, it was a Sikh initiative—led by Sikhs, powered by Sikh spiritual resolve, and carried Punjabi political defiance. To mislabel that legacy is to betray it.



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We have seen the damage up close. [Sikh and Punjabi history](#) labeled as South Asian. Tamil pain labeled as South Asian. Bangladeshi resilience diluted under a meaningless banner. Punjabi literature sidelined in favor of regionally convenient categorization. These terms do not shield. They silence.

When a Sikh man is assaulted and his turban knocked off, as happened in Peterborough in 2023, it is not “South Asian” hate. It is anti-Sikh hate. Yet articles such as Jeevan Sangha’s erase this specificity, recasting a clear religious hate crime into a generic racial episode. (<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/peterborough-hate-crime-sikh-turban-1.6927443>)

When students are trapped in exploitative visa mafias tied to Indian real estate and immigration brokers, it is not a South Asian issue. It is a dominant [India-centric apparatus](#) that remains unexamined under the South Asian smokescreen.

When “certain groups dominate multicultural platforms”, it is not shared inclusion. It is historical asymmetry protected by regional camouflage. Those who erased Sikhs, Dalits, and Tamils in their own nations now wrap themselves in the term “[South Asian](#)” to speak on behalf of all.

This is not unity. This is bureaucratic reduction. This is what happens when language is used to [collapse](#) rather than illuminate. It is [cartographic colonialism](#) at work, a leftover from when the British carved their maps not to describe identities but to manage rebellions.

As Pierre Bourdieu aptly states in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, symbolic violence refers to the imposition of cultural meanings that appear harmless or neutral, yet function to erase, naturalize, and subordinate other ways of being.¹ This is the violence of language dressed as logic, when a term like “[South Asian](#)” seems inclusive but in fact enacts a cartographic silence.

As Balpreet Singh, legal counsel for the World Sikh Organization of Canada, stated in [Baaz News](#): “I agree it’s a [racist term](#), and it erases my identity.”

As the Indus Media Foundation powerfully put it: “The term is a [load of bollocks](#) as it conflates identities arising from lands as far apart as Afghanistan and Myanmar. It makes as much sense culturally as lumping the narratives of Sicilians with Highlander Scots and it’s tantamount to academic bankruptcy.”

Liberating ourselves from the Shackles of South Asianness #shorts

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It is worth noting that the term “South Asian” is rarely, if ever, used by actual religious communities to describe themselves. You will not find a Gurdwara, a Mandir, a Masjid, or even a Buddhist Vihara in Canada that calls itself a “South Asian.” And rightly so. Because these spaces are rooted in sovereign cultural, linguistic, and theological identities.

The only major religious institution in Canada that regularly uses the term is the [South Asian Community Church](#), a [Christian church](#). This is not a critique of Christianity itself, but rather a call to examine the pattern: once again, a colonial umbrella term is being amplified through religious institutions historically affiliated with the state.

This raises troubling historical echoes for a country that is still reckoning with the legacies of church-state collaboration, especially in contexts like [the residential school system](#). When a religious institution becomes the sole spiritual voice to normalize a cartographic identity that most of us reject, it risks participating, however unintentionally, in a new cycle of cultural conversion not just of faith, but of nomenclature. This risks reducing pluralism to a demographic funnel, where spiritual traditions are grouped not by their essence, but by what fits best within the state’s bureaucratic framework.

In a healthy democracy like Canada, one that claims to be committed to equity, dignity, and justice, we must be vigilant about the ways in which language, power, and institutions intersect. Any re-emergence of naming structures that collapse differences in the name of convenience must be challenged with both courage and care. Because democracy cannot survive the erasure of names. It depends on their full, unflattened articulation.

As we sing “O Canada,” with glowing hearts we rise, not as generic silhouettes, but as sovereign souls. To be Canadian is not to flatten difference, but to honour it. In a democracy, names are not inconvenient; they are sacred. And we will not trade ours for a placeholder ever again.

May Waheguru bless Canada, the sovereign Nations of Indigenous peoples, and all of us striving to speak our truths with honour.

We are not “South Asian.”

We are Sikh Canadian, Tamil Canadian, Afghan Canadian, Punjabi Canadian, Bengali Canadian. We are sovereign, distinct, and no longer willing to exchange specificity for convenience.

For more information on the Wanjara Nomad Collections, [visit its website](#). Follow [Pancouver](#) on [Instagram @PancouverMedia](#) and on [Bluesky @pancouver](#).

