

# Wanjara Nomad Collections Team: The term “S.A.” or “S.A. Canadian” is a racist, reductive, and repressive label

Perspectives

Staff

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Maharaja Ranjit Singh founded the first Sikh Empire in 1801 and ruled until 1839. Painting by Sobha Singh.

*The Wanjara Nomad Collections Team views the Sikh diaspora as “Nomads scattered all over the world.” This week, it released the following open letter to Canadians:*

Dear Fellow Canadians,

We are writing this with a sense of urgency and call upon readers to take a step back and fully understand what is at stake with the meaningless term “S.A.” It is time to confront the harsh, undeniable truth.

**The Stark Reality:** The term “S.A.” or “S.A. Canadian” is a racist, reductive, and repressive label. It’s a colonial hangover that does nothing but erase our diverse cultural identities. We’ve had meetings with officials, **written hundreds of social media posts**, **gathered hundreds of videos**, **published articles**, and **conducted radio interviews**, all to oppose this divisive term.

Yet, tragically, the oversimplification of our identities annihilates these nuances, unwittingly aligning with a dangerous narrative that fosters cultural homogenization and echoes right-wing ideologies advocating for a singular nation, one language.

**Your Complicity:** To those from varied backgrounds stretching from British India to Australia, Kenya, Europe, South America, and Canada—including the respected Romani people—understand this: By using or aligning with this term, you are partaking in the form of linguistic Stockholm syndrome. You inadvertently support a narrative that simplifies and erases the unique cultures it supposedly encompasses. Our question or humble request is to the people from eight sovereign countries who may have migrated from British India to Australia, Kenya, Europe, or South America 100 years ago, whose third or fourth generation have come to Canada as recently as yesterday or as long as 130 years ago directly to Canada or pause in different nations for few generations and then arriving at Canada. (We assume that this divisive term also targets respected **Romani people**, at times called Gy...s, who migrated from the Indian subcontinent 1,200 years ago and are also part of that group?)

Those who align with “S.A.” or are lumped into this 3R term (racist, reductive, and repressive) should take a moment to reflect and ask themselves why they are aligning with this term. For those adopting the name, are you doing it naively? Is it for short economic or political benefits, or, as some “house academics” suggest, because it is an academic term? Or are you going through Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS)?

**Your Role:** Understand that you contribute to a narrative that undermines our rich, varied histories each time you use it. The term’s plural nature today may be oversimplified, but it is simultaneously erasing the unique cultures it encompasses, risking cultural homogenization. From a plural term, it will become a singular, akin to the right-wing ideology of one nation and one language in that part of Asia.

**The Consequences Are Real:** This isn’t about being politically correct; it’s about resisting cultural erasure, recolonization, and homogenization. The term’s use, whether by ignorance or intent, aligns with right-wing ideologies of one nation, one language. Is it for economic or political reasons, or, as some “house academics” suggest, because it is an academic term and Statistics Canada says that it is a racialized term? This label undoubtedly represents a form of linguistic Stockholm syndrome. The term “S.A.” or “S.A. Canadian” is a colonial linguistic hangover and is racist, reductive, and repressive. It makes no difference whether the word “Canadian” is added or if it’s called “S.A.”—it is still a violent term.

- As Balpreet Singh, Legal Counsel of the World Sikh Organization, says, **“I agree it’s a racist term, and it erases my identity.”**
- Analogizing the term “South Asian” to a **“landmine”** serves to emphasize its capacity for triggering deeply serious and irreparable consequences. Just as a landmine possesses the potential to cause catastrophic harm, the utilization of the term “South Asian” bears the gravity of potentially exacerbating division, obliterating nuanced distinctions, and instigating profound misunderstandings, controversies, or unintended negativity. This concern is especially pronounced in discussions surrounding matters as pivotal as identity, representation, and cultural sensitivity.
- Anupama Rao, a historian from Barnard College specializing in South Asian Studies, has stated that the term **“South Asia”** was essentially invented for bureaucratic and administrative reasons. This term is considered artificial, having been deliberately crafted to serve geopolitical objectives rather than emerging naturally from the region’s history, culture, or society. In essence, the concept of “South Asia” is perceived as a geopolitical label imposed on the region rather than something that naturally grew out of religious, historical, cultural, or social ties.
- “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 [sic] with Highlander Scots—and it’s tantamount to academic bankruptcy.” – **Indus Media Foundation**.

It took us decades to cast away from the labels of “Hindu,” “Paki” and “East Indian”. Why are you so adamant about adopting a new label? As a Canadian, we should be proud of your heritage.

**A Misguided Museum Title:** The proposed “S.A., MUSEUM OR “S.A. Canadian Museum” and similar titles are part of the problem. They perpetuate stereotypes and overlook the distinct stories of our communities. We appreciate British Columbia’s decision to avoid the “S” word, but even the interim “S.A. Museum” is problematic. It needs to respect our diverse histories. The term’s plural nature today may be oversimplified, but it is simultaneously erasing the unique cultures it encompasses, risking cultural homogenization. From a plural term, it will become a singular, akin to the right-wing ideology of one nation and one language in that part of Asia.

**Call to Action:** This is a call to stop using “S.A.” Now. We must find alternatives honoring our individual and collective identities. Anything less is a disservice to our communities and heritage.

It’s time for a change, and it starts with you.

Let’s be unequivocally clear!

I AM A .... CANADIAN

I AM NOT SOUTH ASIAN PERIOD.

**Counter Arguments and Responses:** In full transparency, we are also listing out various dissents along with our responses accordingly.

**“The Term ‘South Asian’ is a Useful General Descriptor”:** The term ‘South Asian’ is a lazy and careless categorization. It blatantly disregards the rich tapestry of unique cultures, languages, and histories it claims to represent. It’s about more than just convenience but the negligent oversimplification of diverse identities. We can’t hide behind the guise of utility to justify cultural ignorance.

**“The Term Helps in Unity and Solidarity Among Diverse Groups”:** Asserting that the term fosters unity is a misguided excuse for cultural obliteration. Absolute unity and solidarity come from recognizing and valuing our distinct identities, not from melting them into a homogenized, indistinct mass. We refuse to let our individual stories and heritages be swallowed up by a catch-all term that does nothing but dilute our uniqueness.

**“The Term is Widely Accepted and Understood”:** Popularity doesn’t equate to propriety. Many terms, once widely accepted, are now recognized as deeply offensive. We must be vigilant and proactive in challenging language perpetuating **stereotypes**, racism and ignorance, regardless of how ‘accepted’ it is. Change starts with rejecting complacency in the face of cultural disrespect.

**“The Term is Necessary for Statistical and Administrative Purposes”:** Prioritizing administrative convenience over cultural respect is inexcusable. It needs to be a stronger argument to maintain a status quo that marginalizes and misrepresents. We must develop more thoughtful and sensitive categorization methods that reflect the diversity of human experiences and identities.

**“Changing the Term Won’t Make a Real Difference”:** Claiming that changing this term is futile is underestimating the power of language. Words are not just labels; they shape our understanding of the world and each other. Altering our language is crucial in dismantling harmful stereotypes and forging a society that genuinely appreciates the depth and breadth of its cultural landscapes.

*For more information on the Wanjara Nomad Collections Team, visit its website.*