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# Review: South Asian Canadian Digital Archive

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A review of South Asian Canadian Digital Archive, a project exploring the South Asian diaspora in Canada, led by the South Asian Studies Institute at the University of the Fraser Valley

by *Luis Meneses*



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## Project

[South Asian Canadian Digital Archive](#)

## Project Leads

[South Asian Studies Institute](#), University of the Fraser Valley

## Project URL

<https://sacda.ca/>

## Project Reviewer

[Luis Meneses](#), Vancouver Island University

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## Project Overview

The South Asian Canadian Digital Archive (SACDA), an initiative of the South Asian Studies Institute at the University of the Fraser Valley, is a pan-Canadian digital archive that documents the history and heritage of the South Asian diaspora in Canada. SACDA partners with memory institutions, community organizations, individuals, and families to digitize, describe, and provide online public access to heritage materials created by or relevant to the South Asian Canadian diaspora.

SACDA seeks to fill a critically important archival and historical gap in Canadian history. In the context of South Asian Canadian archival materials being rarely available, erased, or neglected, documenting the lived experiences and the cultural heritage of South Asian communities is an urgent preservation priority. SACDA thus facilitates access to inclusive Canadian heritage by collecting, preserving and presenting primary source materials of the South Asian Canadian diaspora's 120+ years of history.

With extensive community engagement and a focus on social histories, with collaborative tools as praxis, SACDA seeks not only to fill historical gaps but also to transform existing colonial knowledge infrastructures and to foster knowledge diversity and equity. SACDA

emphasizes the cultures of orality, tacit knowledge, and visual histories, and has created a thesaurus to rupture conventional controlled vocabularies. At the core of its praxis, SACDA seeks to actively involve the community in archival processing and holds community sessions to collect metadata in South Asian languages and vernaculars. Thus, knowledge, from creation to sharing, becomes a community-driven project that informs and is informed by our collective histories.

SACDA currently consists of 50 collections with over 15,000 items and three online exhibits. These collections and exhibits speak to the histories, cultures, and key contributions of South Asian communities in Canada that range from immigration and social histories, arts and culture, and labor history and activism to built environment histories. The materials available are multilingual and reflect the linguistic diversity of the South Asian region.

SACDA uses an open-access collection management system, Collective Access, to build the repository and manage the digitized materials. All of the materials digitized for this project are freely available on the project website. Textual records undergo optical character recognition (OCR), which will be

harvested by PDFMiner in Collective Access to facilitate full text searches.

The SACDA project team is spearheaded by Satwinder Kaur Bains with digital asset archivists and a dedicated team of research assistants.

The SACDA team is spearheaded by Dr. Satwinder Kaur Bains with digital asset archivists and a dedicated team of research assistants.

**Current:**

Dr. Satwinder Bains (Director, January 2020 - present)

Thamilini Jothilingam (Digital Asset Archivist, November 2021 - present)

Alisa Sohi (Assistant Digital Asset Archivist, August 2022 - present)

Faria Firoz (Graphic Designer, September 2023 - present)

Henna Mann (Filmmaker, January 2024 - present)

Rashneet (Co-op Student/Research Assistant, September 2023 - present)

Pratham (Research Assistant, January 2023 - present)

Arnav Mehta (Assistant Web Developer,  
September 2022 - present)

Kiara Dabreo (Research Assistant, September  
2023 - present)

Raaynaa Madaan (Research Assistant, June -  
December 2022; January 2024 - present)

Gauri Sethi (Research Assistant, January 2024 -  
present)

Annshul Kashyap (Work-Study Student,  
September 2023 - present)

**Past:**

Aishmitta (Volunteer, September - October  
2023)

Ansh Seth (Research Assistant, January - April  
2022)

Amreen Kaur (Research Student Intern, July -  
August 2022)

Arshdeep Sandhu (Assistant Web Developer,  
January 2021 - December 2022)

Balraj Singh (Research Assistant, September  
2022 - present)

Benjamin Arends (Work-Study Student,  
February - March 2021)

Dharani Persaud (Graduate Research Assistant,  
May - August 2023)

Gurkiran Aulakh (Research Student Intern, May  
- August 2022)

Jahnvi (Research Assistant, December 2021 -  
April 2022)

Jesse Kaufman (Marketing & Communications  
Consultant, September 2021 - April 2022)

Kamal Sidhu (Translator, June - July 2023)

Dr. Kusum Soni (Coordinator, October 2020 -  
October 2022)

Madhavee Inamdar (Project Manager, June 2022  
- July 2021)

Magnus Berg (Digital Asset Archivist,  
September 2020 - September 2021)

Manveer Singh Chatha (Research Assistant,  
September - December 2022)

Meg McGinnis (Practicum Student, February -  
March 2022)

Mitali Bharwaj (Research Assistant, January -  
August 2023)

Pat Garland (Practicum Student, February -  
March 2023)

Prabhpreet Singh Gill (Research Student Intern,  
May - August 2022)

Prati Kapoor (Research Assistant, November -  
December 2023)

Ravjeet Dyal (Research Assistant, January -  
August 2023)

Sadhvi Suri (Assistant Web Developer,  
September 2020 - January 2022)

Shivam Vashisht (Research Assistant, January -  
December 2022)

Tania Teixeira (Cataloguing Technician,  
September 2021 - February 2022)

Tim Ubels (May - August 2021)

Varshaa Kashyap (Research Assistant, December  
2021 - April 2022)

SACDA partners with other institutions to  
collaboratively develop archival collections and  
educational resources, and to share skills.

SACDA's current institutional partners include  
the University of Toronto Scarborough,  
Waterloo University Library and Archives,  
Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University,  
Kabir Cultural Centre, British Columbia

Electronic Library Network, British Columbia Forest Discovery Centre, British Columbia Labour Heritage Centre, Burnaby Village Museum, Chilliwack Museum and Archives, City of Delta Archives, Cowichan Valley Museum and Archives, Kaatza Station Museum and Archives, Paldi Historical Museum, Port Moody Station Museum, Sikh Heritage Museum, Simon Fraser University Library, Tamil Cultural Society of British Columbia, Reach Gallery Museum, Royal British Columbia Museum, University of British Columbia, University of the Fraser Valley Library, University of the Fraser Valley Information Studies Department, Vancouver Maritime Museum, White Rock Museum and Archives, and Yucho Chow Community Archive. The project is funded by the Government of British Columbia, the Government of Canada, and the British Columbia History Digitization Program.

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## **Project Review**

### **Luis Meneses**

The South Asian Canadian Digital Archive (SACDA), an initiative of the South Asian Studies Institute at the University of the Fraser Valley, fills a critically important archival and historical gap in Canadian history: South Asian Canadian archival materials are rarely available,



mostly due to being erased or neglected. Thus, documenting and preserving the lived experiences and the cultural heritage of South Asian communities is a pressing and urgent task.

As of August of 2023, the project consists of 50 collections and three exhibits. These collections and exhibits speak to the histories, cultures, and key contributions of South Asian communities in Canada that range from immigration and anecdotes, to arts and culture, to labor history and activism. I found that collections and exhibits were intuitive and easy to navigate, allowing users to explore the documents depending on their level of interest. In this sense, SACDA is similar to the Canadian Letters Project: an online archive of the Canadian war experience told through the letters and images of Canadians themselves. Personally, I learned that the Canadian government took away the right to vote from South Asians in 1908. I also found it very interesting that the materials and documents are multilingual, a direct consequence of the linguistic diversity of South Asia, which can present several directions for future research.


According to their statement of use, SACDA provides access to digitized primary sources that have been loaned by participating community

members, memory institutions, and organizations. In many cases, the materials have entered the public domain or have been licensed to use in the project. The project uses PDFMiner, a Python library, for text extraction and full-text searches. PDFMiner supports the extraction of Chinese, Japanese and Korean (which fall outside the scope of the project) and vertical writing scripts. This raises some questions on the accuracy of the text extraction, ingestion workflow, and benefits and challenges. I expect that these questions will be addressed in presentations or papers showcasing the project.





SACDA uses CollectiveAccess, a free, open-source software for cataloguing and publishing museum and archival collections. One aspect that was not mentioned in the online literature is the project's long-term preservation strategy. In *Planned Obsolescence* (NYU Press, 2011), Kathleen Fitzpatrick has argued that many online projects in the digital humanities have an implied planned obsolescence, which can threaten the completeness and the sustainability of online projects. The convenience and familiarity of computational methods can make us overlook that there is a certain fragility associated with our online tools.


To summarize, SACDA fills a critically important archival and historical gap in Canadian history.


The collections and exhibits were intuitive and easy-to-navigate, allowing users to explore the documents depending on their level of interest. I expect that its collections and exhibits will continue to grow over time.

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