

## **Project Overview**

*The mission of MIT is to advance knowledge and educate students in science, technology, and other areas of scholarship that will best serve the nation and the world in the 21st century.*

*MIT is committed to a diverse community that celebrates every individual from every corner of the globe. We believe this makes us a better place for innovation, science, and the arts to find success. (ICEO)*

MIT's mission and commitment to diversity is founded on its global position as an institute of excellence. The presence of international students and faculty from across the world affirms this mission of inclusion. Since its inception in 1861, MIT has been shaped by its global connections that go back more than a century. In 1910, approximately 6% of MIT's student body came from outside the US, a larger proportion than any other school in America at the time. Today, international students comprise a third of the student body at MIT, while 20% of MIT's students identify as Asian, many of whom are first and second generation Americans. MIT's present is inextricably linked with its past. A hundred and sixty years after its founding, the Institute is today finally reckoning with its past. MIT's history is entangled with the history America itself, a complicated past full of inclusions and exclusions, as the on-going [MIT and slavery](#) project and [the Institute's Land Acknowledgement Statement](#) have shown. While MIT is located in America and its history maps on to that of the US, the people and knowledge produced at the Institute are intimately connected with the world. Our project, South Asia and MIT, looks at this global history of MIT from the perspective of its South Asian connections.

MIT's earliest commitment to inclusion and diversity date back to 1901 when MIT President Henry Pritchett stated that no institution "which undertakes to limit its ministry to its own section or community is worthy of the highest devotion." Then, and now, it is the presence of international students that enable MIT to make this claim to celebrate its efforts at inclusion and elide ongoing exclusions. Students from Asia and Asian Americans were among the first non-white graduates of the institute, and they continue to [outnumber](#) African American and American Indian students. The [first student from China](#) was part of the Class of 1883, while the first student from India came to MIT in 1882, while [the first African American student attended MIT](#) in 1888. More than a century later, in stark contrast to MIT's Asian-identifying students, Black and African Americans [constitute only 3.9%](#) of the entire student body today. The Institute's South Asian alumni include thousands of undergraduates and graduates from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, and a very large number of first- and second-generation South Asians from the US, UK, Canada, East Africa, Mauritius, and elsewhere. Our project uncovers the personal, professional, and intellectual journeys of MIT's South Asian affiliates to highlight the ways in which MIT's past and present have been shaped by histories of immigration and race in America, decolonization and nation-building in South Asia, and globalization and technological revolutions across the world. Our findings will be documented in an online archive and showcased in an exhibition at MIT in Fall 2022.

## **Project Details**

Across the schools of Engineering, Science, Architecture and Planning, Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences, and Business, MIT faculty, students and staff have been engaged at the forefront of research, technology, and innovation activities in South Asia, and since its inception in 1998, MIT-India has sent over one thousand student interns and researchers to a host of industries and organizations in India, Nepal and Sri Lanka, providing them opportunities to learn from, and contribute to, the region's existing and emerging needs. In the first half of the 20th century, when the British colonial state provided few opportunities for technical education to Indians, freedom fighters and rulers of small princely states looked to MIT for its technical and economic expertise to develop their states and country. At independence, prime ministers and presidents of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal relied on MIT's engineers, architects, and economists to modernize their new nations, educate their citizens, and build educational institutes of excellence modeled on MIT, such as the IITs. MIT alums laid the foundation of India's information technology industry, and the institute's thousands of South Asian alum are an integral part of the global world of technology and development that has benefited the United States and South Asia.

Our project, led by current MIT faculty, students and staff, tells the remarkable story of South Asia and MIT to honor the determination and grit of multiple generations of South Asians at MIT, and celebrate this alumni's many accomplishments, technical expertise, and ingenuity that have significantly advanced life in South Asia, the United States and the world.

## **Research Team**

[Sana Aiyar, Associate Professor, History](#)

[Dr Abha Sur, Lecturer, Science, Technology and Society, and Women and Gender Studies](#)

[Nureen Das, Program Manager, MIT India/South Asia](#)

[Dr Ranu Boppana, President MIT South Asian Alumni Association](#)

MIT students

## **Work to date**

Since December 2020, 18 student interns have been researching *Tech* and Institute archives, visualizing enrollment data, writing, editing and archiving alumni biographies and collecting oral histories through interviews with alumni and faculty. As of July 2021, more than 40 alumni and faculty have been interviewed. This material has been archived on a website built by the students.

## **Next Steps**

Between August 2021-August 2022, the team will be working with students to complete collecting material for the digital archive and curate items for the campus exhibition.

