
REAP: Representational Exclusion, Amplification, and Persistence

Why South Asian Americans Are Absent from Mainstream
American Storytelling, and What a Philanthropic Experiment
Might Need to Address

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Abstract. South Asian Americans are among the most educated and economically successful demographic groups in the United States. They are also among the most distorted and absent on American screens. This paper proposes a diagnostic framework—REAP: Representational Exclusion, Amplification, and Persistence—to ask why the equilibrium may be so durable, and whether it is susceptible to deliberate intervention at all.

The goal is not a genre of South Asian American stories. It is South Asian Americans as unremarkable presences in mainstream American storytelling—the detective, the soldier, the villain, the doctor—where their identity is as incidental as a white character’s whiteness. Full representational citizenship, not a niche. Whether that goal is achievable, and through what means, are the questions this paper tries to frame rather than answer.

REAP is built on five pillars: the experience-good trap that systematically excludes minority-led stories from the proven mean; oligopoly amplification that suppresses the competitive exploration that would correct the bias; a demographically constrained greenlight chain that launders parochialism as market data; an internalized prior that persists even when SAA creators are in the room; and a distribution channel trap that converts qualified successes into negative data points by routing SAA-led content away from the mainstream genre audiences whose engagement is the only data that updates the greenlight prior. All five are held as hypotheses, not conclusions, and are offered to invite correction.

The paper also asks whether small-scale experimentation could generate prior-updating data that the industry cannot or will not produce itself—and if so, who the right funder of that exploration might be, and on what theory of change. These questions are posed rather than resolved. The paper is a prequel to a proposed experiment, not the experiment’s justification.

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1 Introduction: An Anomaly and a Question

The South Asian Americans I know—Deans of business schools, Senior Partners at McKinsey, CEOs of companies with multi-billion-dollar market capitalizations, surgeons, Venture Capitalists, teaching award winners—bear almost no resemblance to the characters American media has assigned to our community. The convenience store clerk with an exaggerated accent. The nerdy engineering student who cannot talk to women. The mystical sage dispensing ancient wisdom to white protagonists. The “Arab-coded” terrorist. The social awkwardness trope is not a simplification of reality about the people I know. It feels more like a fabrication.

Fabrications have costs. They may shape how non-South-Asian Americans perceive this community, how recruiters evaluate it, and—through what the literature calls stereotype threat [Steele & Aronson, 1997]—how younger South Asian Americans see themselves. The cultural and media studies literature has documented these effects carefully. The question this paper adds is structural: why does the industry keep producing the fabrication, and is the equilibrium susceptible to deliberate intervention?

I am not a media scholar. My background is operations management—supply chains, inventory theory, healthcare systems. I bring to this problem the disposition of someone who has spent a career finding market gaps, building proof-of-concept at low cost, and positioning larger players to act on what the proof shows. The observations assembled here will be familiar to specialists in parts; what I am attempting is to connect them in a way that is legible to the question of intervention design.

The literature I am drawing on—media studies, cultural studies, feminist media studies, diaspora studies—is entirely new to me. I have read across it quickly and with a specific question in mind, mapping what I found to the films and shows I have watched over the years. Specialists will see the gaps; I hope the question survives them.

Paraphrasing Pólya: if you cannot solve a hard problem, find the related easier one you also cannot solve. The hard problem is changing the representational equilibrium of a multi-billion-dollar industry. The easier one this paper attempts: can the problem be diagnosed precisely enough that an experiment might know what to target—and if so, is such an experiment worth attempting, and who should fund it?

These questions are posed rather than answered. The paper is a prequel to a proposed experiment, not the experiment’s justification. Whether small-scale experimentation could generate the prior-updating data the industry cannot produce itself, whether philanthropy is the right funder or simply the available one, and whether any of this would actually shift the equilibrium—all remain open.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 presents the REAP framework and its five pillars. Section 3 presents the Staircase taxonomy. Section 4 maps the landscape through case studies and tables, including an extended analysis of *Silicon Valley*. Section 5 describes what already exists and what the Amritraj paradox reveals. Section 6

asks whether experimentation is worthwhile and, if so, who the right funder might be. Section 7 offers the representation and daily life hypothesis. Section 8 derives what an experiment would need to address if one were attempted. Section 9 closes with questions.

2 REAP: A Five-Pillar Diagnostic Framework

The cultural and media studies literature has built the conceptual foundation this paper stands on. Davé [2013] developed the “brown voice” concept—the sonic stereotype that racializes SAA characters through accent performance regardless of the actor’s actual background. Havens et al. [2009] documented “industry lore,” the informal belief systems governing greenlight decisions. Erigha [2019] traced the racial politics of Hollywood’s labor market. Lopez [2016] documents the history of Asian American media activism from grassroots collectives in the 1970s through MANAA. Wolock & Punathambekar [2015] examine MTV-Desi and NBC’s *Outsourced* as “productive failures.” This scholarship has named the problem, theorized its mechanisms, and built the vocabulary without which this paper could not exist.

The framework I call REAP—Representational Exclusion, Amplification, and Persistence—attempts to identify where market-based levers are. The acronym maps onto five pillars: the experience-good trap; oligopoly amplification; the constrained greenlight chain; the internalized prior; and the distribution channel trap.

2.1 Pillar One: The Experience-Good Trap

Entertainment is structurally unusual. Demand is difficult to forecast before investment; investment is largely sunk before revenue is realized. De Vany [2004] showed that box-office revenues follow a power-law distribution: a small number of extreme hits generate most value, and this is genuinely unpredictable *ex ante*. The studio response Elberse [2013] documents—concentrating resources on bets designed to resemble previously successful content—may be rational risk management even if it produces troubling representational outcomes.

If the proven mean has historically featured white protagonists, variance-reduction logic may generate systematic bias against stories with SAA leads—not because executives are prejudiced, but because the financial architecture rewards resemblance to the past. The self-reinforcing dynamic: thin prior data generates underinvestment, which generates thin new data, which confirms the prior.

2.2 Pillar Two: Oligopoly Amplifies the Bias

Mosco [2009] and Hesmondhalgh [2019] suggest that media consolidation suppresses the competitive exploration that would naturally generate product variety. The streaming land-grab of 2015–2022 may have been a temporary exception: competitive pressure

produced a bounded expansion of SAA characters in mainstream content. As that phase converged, content investment contracted [Hollywood Reporter, 2025].

2.3 Pillar Three: The Constrained Greenlight Chain

The executives who hold creative power appear to be overwhelmingly white, predominantly male, drawn from a narrow educational and class background [Hunt & Ramon, 2019]. Their average tenure is short—three to four years—and career risk may reinforce conservatism. Havens’s “industry lore” may function as demographic parochialism laundered as market data. Saha [2018] calls this the “rationalizing/racializing logic of capital.”

2.4 Pillar Four: The Internalized Prior

The first three pillars locate the problem in financial architecture, market structure, and the demographics of the greenlight chain—all structural, all external to SAA creators themselves. But a pattern complicates the supply-side story: even when SAA creators are given the room, something recognizable persists.

Mindy Kaling, creator and star of *The Mindy Project*, gave American television its first SAA female protagonist with genuine comedic and professional interiority. She has been consistently criticized for organizing Dr. Lahiri’s romantic life entirely around white male partners across six seasons [Polis Project, 2021]. The critical literature has named this pattern with some precision. Writing in Al Jazeera America, E. Alex Jung argued that the recurrence “is not a question of fate running into you but the perpetuation of the great lie of romance”—a structure that masks how racial fantasy operates at the interpersonal level [Jung, 2015]. Ayesha Siddiqi, in a BuzzFeed roundtable, coined the phrase “racial economics of desirability” to describe the dynamic, arguing that the show’s investment in unremarkable white men “feels like engaging in a fantasy that shouldn’t have appeared fantastic in the first place” [Siddiqi, 2014]. Bhatt [2019] in *Feminist Media Studies* documents how this pattern persists across Kaling’s subsequent shows—*Never Have I Ever*, *The Sex Lives of College Girls*—suggesting it is not incidental to one series but structural across her body of work.

The pattern is complicated, however, by a question the critics do not always pause on: whether this is a representational failure or autobiography. Kaling’s known significant relationships have been with white men. Jhumpa Lahiri is married to Alberto Vourvoulias-Bush, a Greek-Guatemalan journalist—not a white American, but not a South Asian partner either. Both creators may, in part, be writing their own lives and desires onto their protagonists. If so, the pattern in their work reflects something real about the romantic lives of highly educated, cosmopolitan SAA women in America—for whom interracial relationships with non-SAA partners are genuinely common—rather than a distortion imposed by commercial pressure or an internalized hierarchy.

The more precise claim the literature supports is therefore not that SAA female pro-

tagonists date non-SAA men—many real SAA women do—but that the *emotional architecture* of these stories tends to position the protagonist’s desirability and worth as requiring validation through the non-SAA partner’s gaze, rather than being self-grounded. This is what Hong [2020] identifies more broadly in her analysis of Lahiri’s fiction: that the publishing industry has used SAA work to construct a fantasy of the compliant immigrant striver—a story organized for white comfort rather than SAA interiority. The fault, Hong argues carefully, lies not in Lahiri herself but in the structural incentives that shaped which stories got amplified. Siddiqi put the Kaling version of this most sharply: “her desirability is present, but trumped by the assumed desirability of every portly thin-haired white guy around her” [Siddiqi, 2014]. That asymmetry—organizing the protagonist’s interiority around an external standard rather than an internal one—is the structural pattern worth naming. It is also the pattern that Thakore [2014] identifies more broadly as characteristic of even apparently progressive SAA representations: they continue to privilege white identity as the normative reference point even when the SAA character is central.

The *Lahiri-Lahiri convergence*—Kaling named her fictional doctor after Jhumpa Lahiri; both share a community and a commitment to SAA female interiority; and both, across entirely different creative contexts and personal circumstances, arrive at a similar emotional architecture—is offered here not as proof of the pattern but as an observation that scholars better positioned than this paper may be able to evaluate. The convergence may reflect autobiography, may reflect absorbed cultural norms, or may reflect something the literature on diasporic desire has already named. Gopinath [2005] argues that diasporic South Asian subjectivity is constituted through a complex negotiation with Western norms of desire that cannot be reduced to either assimilation or resistance. If that negotiation tends, in highly educated second-generation SAA women, to produce a particular emotional architecture, then the pattern in Kaling and Lahiri may be less a failure of representation than an accurate rendering of a genuinely complicated diasporic experience—one that the screen has so far been unable to hold with the complexity it deserves.

As Singh [2023] notes, placing blame solely on individual SAA creators is unhelpful; the real issues are systemic. This paper does not blame Kaling or Lahiri. The pattern is named because any experiment that depends on putting SAA creators in rooms depends on an assumption—that their presence automatically updates the prior in the ways that matter—that deserves scrutiny. The creative brief matters as much as the creative presence.

2.5 Pillar Five: The Distribution Channel Trap

The first four pillars describe mechanisms operating at the content-creation and greenlight stages. The fifth pillar captures a mechanism that operates *downstream*: how platform-layer distribution decisions reinforce, and in some cases amplify, the biases installed at the greenlight stage.

The distribution channel trap has three components:

Categorical routing. Streaming platforms algorithmically and curatorially route content into genre buckets. SAA-led stories are systematically routed into “multi-cultural,” “South Asian interest,” or “world cinema” carousels rather than genre carousels (“thriller,” “drama,” “comedy”)—regardless of the content’s actual genre register. This routing determines which audiences encounter the content, self-selecting for SAA viewers and self-deselecting for the mainstream crossover audience whose engagement is the only data that updates the greenlight prior.

Completion-rate feedback loops. Platforms use completion rates and re-engagement signals to calibrate future investment. If an SAA-led story is routed to an audience self-selected for SAA content, its completion rate reflects that audience’s preferences, not the mainstream genre audience’s preferences. The data fed back into the greenlight system is structurally misleading: it appears to confirm that SAA-led content has a narrow audience ceiling, when it has in fact only been tested against a narrow audience.

Marketing and thumbnail framing. The visual language of promotional materials for SAA-led content frequently foregrounds cultural markers—traditional dress, family gatherings, diasporic signifiers—even when the underlying story is identity-incident. This framing activates the same categorical routing in human recommendation systems (word-of-mouth, press coverage) that the algorithmic system operates.

The distribution channel trap is particularly important because it means that even content which clears the greenlight chain may fail to generate prior-updating data if it is routed incorrectly. *The Namesake* is the clearest historical case: a film with genuine SAA interiority that was distributed and marketed as a diasporic nostalgia film, reaching audiences already interested in that category, and whose box-office performance was subsequently read as evidence of a ceiling on SAA-led films’ mainstream potential. The trap converted a qualified success into a negative data point.

Any experiment that takes the five-pillar diagnosis seriously must address distribution routing explicitly, not as an afterthought.

3 The Staircase Taxonomy

The taxonomy below builds on [Clark \[1969\]](#) and [Thakore \[2014, 2018\]](#).

Step One is the professional-class, English-fluent, assimilation-negotiating SAA narrative:

Mini-Step 1a—The assimilation comedy. The SAA character navigating white professional spaces with humor and self-awareness. The genre can be greenlit. It is a foothold, not a ceiling.

Mini-Step 1b—The dramatic protagonist. The SAA lead in a non-comedic, high-stakes narrative—crime, war, medicine—remains rare outside prestige television.

Mini-Step 1c—The fully ordinary. The SAA character for whom identity is not the subject: not negotiating assimilation, simply present in a story about something else. This is what full representational citizenship looks like.

Mini-Step 1d—The antagonist and morally complex. SAA villains, antiheroes, morally compromised figures—written with the depth the industry extends to white characters. Their absence is its own form of condescension.

Step Two is national-origin and religious diversity: Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Sri Lankan, Nepali, Sikh, Muslim American characters.

Step Three is class and labor: motel owners, taxi drivers, domestic workers, gig economy workers.

Step Four is gender and sexuality beyond the binary.

Step Five is Dalit, caste-marginalized, and religious minority communities, including Ahmadiyya Muslims and Indo-Caribbean Americans.

Step Six: Mixed-heritage and multiracial SAA characters. SAA Americans of mixed heritage—South Asian and Black, South Asian and Latino/a, South Asian and white, South Asian and East Asian—are nearly entirely absent from American screens, despite constituting a growing and internally diverse population. Their representational absence is doubly compounded: they do not fit cleanly into either the SAA category (which tends toward monoracial Indian-American templates) or the mixed-race representational frameworks that have developed primarily around Black-white biracial identity. A character whose mother is Tamil and father is Nigerian, or whose parents are Pakistani and Puerto Rican, inhabits a subjectivity that the current staircase does not reach. Step Six names that territory.

The staircase names all six steps because a complete picture of South Asian America is larger than Step One. This paper’s own analysis remains concentrated at Step One—an honest limitation that any experiment design should name explicitly.

4 The Landscape: Case Studies and Tables

4.1 The Namesake

Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake* (2003) and Mira Nair’s film adaptation (2007) are the most fully realized examples of Step One execution in recent SAA creative work. Nair’s film diverges from the novel in ways that reveal the medium’s pressures: the temporally fluid structure becomes linear; Bengali folk music is added; a Taj Mahal visit is inserted. The film tilts toward nostalgia for India in a way the novel does not [Davé, 2013].

What it proves: Films with genuine SAA interiority, made by SAA creators, can achieve mainstream critical and commercial success. *What it leaves unexplored:* The genre story; the identity-incidental character; the non-Bengali SAA experience; the working-class narrative. And, through the lens of Pillar Five, it demonstrates the distribution channel trap in operation: routed as diasporic nostalgia rather than as drama.

4.2 Silicon Valley (HBO, 2014–2019): An Extended Analysis

Silicon Valley occupies an unusual position in the REAP landscape. It is a prestige comedy that directly satirizes the industry in which South Asians are statistically most overrepresented in American professional life—and it is also a show that illustrates nearly every mechanism REAP identifies, in miniature, within a single recurring character.

4.2.1 Presence and Visibility

The only major SAA figure is Dinesh Chugtai, played by Kumail Nanjiani, who is explicitly marked as Pakistani in the show’s dialogue. This is striking given that the real Silicon Valley has a very visible population of Indian and other South Asian engineers, founders, and executives. The show technically has SAA presence while under-representing the range and volume of South Asian participation in the actual industry it satirizes.

The absence of any Indian lead is structurally significant. *Silicon Valley* is a show whose satirical intelligence depends on getting the sociology of tech culture right. Its failure to represent the most numerically dominant SAA subgroup in that sociology is not a minor omission—it is a gap in the satire’s own premises.

4.2.2 Characterization of Dinesh: Mini-Step 1a, Not 1c

Dinesh is written as a socially awkward programmer, constantly bickering with Gilfoyle, anxious about status, romance, and recognition. Within the REAP staircase, he occupies Mini-Step 1a at best—and arguably oscillates between Mini-Step 1a and the stereotype baseline.

Compared with older caricatures, Nanjiani has said that roles like Dinesh represent an improvement over the cab-driver or 7-Eleven stereotypes he used to be offered, where he was asked to “play up the accent.” He has also noted that certain racist jokes in the show were acceptable to him because the target of the joke mattered: he was more comfortable when the joke exposed the ignorance or racism of a white character, rather than simply mocking a brown person [Nanjiani, 2021].

From a REAP perspective, this framing is important but insufficient. Dinesh is allowed neurosis and competitiveness but not much interiority beyond comic insecurity. His ethnicity functions primarily as a *punchline toggle*—Pakistani vs. Indian jokes, arranged

marriage jokes, accent-adjacent humor—rather than as a site of complex subjectivity. The show reaches Mini-Step 1a but does not approach Mini-Step 1c or 1d.

4.2.3 *Structural Erasure and the REAP Pillars*

The show illustrates Pillars One through Three with unusual clarity. The experience-good trap (Pillar One) is visible in the show’s character architecture: Dinesh exists as a single SAA variable rather than one of several, because the greenlight system had no prior for multiple SAA characters coexisting unremarkably (a gap *The Pitt* would later close). Pillar Three—the constrained greenlight chain—is visible in the show’s failure to turn its satirical intelligence on how race and immigration status structure the tech industry; the show is sharp about white male founder culture and VC excess, but rarely examines how South Asians are positioned between white capital and globalized technical labor.

Jian Yang, the show’s other prominent Asian character, illustrates Pillar Two’s amplification mechanism. His arc—accent comedy, knockoff app schemes, “SeeFood” as a parody of SAA entrepreneurship—has been read by critics as trafficking in familiar tropes about Chinese and South Asian immigrants even when defenders claim subversion. Against this backdrop, Dinesh’s relative “normalcy” functions as a fig leaf: a somewhat-rounded SAA character amid a landscape of otherwise flattened Asian figures.

4.2.4 *Nanjiani’s Career Arc as a REAP Data Point*

Nanjiani’s subsequent career illustrates the internalized prior and its contestation simultaneously. *The Big Sick* (2017) places a Pakistani American romantic lead in a mainstream studio comedy and finds a broad audience—a Harold and Kumar–class prior-updating event that the industry again read as franchise-specific rather than category-level. His later push for the Kingo character in *Eternals* (2021)—explicitly designed as the opposite of the social awkwardness trope: cool, physically capable, joyful—is the clearest example in the contemporary record of an SAA actor actively contesting the internalized prior at the character-design stage.

Looking back on his broader career, Nanjiani has described a pattern in which “brown dudes” in Hollywood are offered two types of roles: the nerdy, weak character or the terrorist. His subsequent choices represent a deliberate effort to expand that band.

4.2.5 *What Silicon Valley Proves and Leaves Unexplored*

What it proves: A prestige comedy can sustain an SAA ensemble presence across six seasons; some stereotype-adjacent jokes can be deployed satirically rather than pejoratively when the target of the joke is white cultural myopia. *What it leaves unexplored:* The Indian American engineer, founder, or executive—the most statistically common

SAA presence in the actual Silicon Valley—is entirely absent; Dinesh reaches Mini-Step 1a but not 1c or 1d; the show’s satirical intelligence never turns on the racial and immigration structures that actually organize the industry it depicts.

4.3 The Pitt (Max, 2025–present)

The Pitt is the most significant recent data point from prestige television. The Emmy-winning medical drama carries two SAA characters simultaneously: Dr. Samira Mohan (Supriya Ganesh), a Tamil American third-year resident, and Javadi (Shabana Azeez), a third-year medical student. Neither is defined by her South Asian identity. Ganesh noted in interviews that she had previously lost roles because productions “didn’t want two brown people,” and that seeing her name alongside Azeez’s on the first call sheet was healing precisely because their coexistence was unremarkable.

What it proves: Prestige streaming drama can carry two SAA characters simultaneously without either being defined by her identity, and wins Emmys doing so. The “only one” prior has been empirically falsified. *What it leaves unexplored:* The SAA dramatic lead outside medicine; the non-Indian SAA character; the SAA antagonist.

4.4 Ghosts: The Broadcast Test (CBS, 2021–present)

Ghosts offers a data point that is in one respect stronger than *The Pitt*: it is not prestige streaming but CBS network broadcast primetime. Utkarsh Ambudkar—Tamil American—stars as Jay Arondekar, one of the two living leads around whom the entire ensemble is organized. Jay’s SAA identity is structurally irrelevant to every episode across five seasons. He is not negotiating assimilation. He is not the butt of an accent joke. The show has run long enough that his presence has simply become unremarkable within the story. That unremarkability is the point.

What it proves: Mini-Step 1c at network broadcast scale. *What it leaves unexplored:* Mini-Step 1d—Jay is warm, funny, and good; moral complexity and the antagonist role remain absent. And through the lens of Pillar Five, the CBS ratings data has never been converted into a greenlight argument, demonstrating the distribution channel trap operating in its feedback-loop form: the data exists and is public, but has not been translated.

4.5 Harold and Kumar: The Translation Failure

Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle (2004) is the sharpest historical test case for the diagnostic framework. The film found a broad non-SAA audience and became a commercial franchise with two sequels. The prior-updating data existed. The prior did not update at the category level.

The industry read the film’s success as specific to those two actors and that premise, not as evidence that SAA leads in genre films work generically. This failure has a name:

the translation layer was absent. Wolock & Punathambekar [2015] offer a precise frame: “productive failures” in which industry professionals systematically misread prior-updating data in ways that produce the wrong lessons. Harold and Kumar is the archetype; Ghosts, two decades later, is the same failure at larger scale.

4.6 Ashok Amritraj and the Pipeline Hypothesis

Ashok Amritraj—born in Chennai, Indian American—has operated Hyde Park Entertainment for over 35 years, producing more than 100 mainstream Hollywood films with worldwide revenues exceeding \$2 billion. His films are mainstream American genre and prestige films. He sits on the Academy’s Producers Executive Board.

The Amritraj paradox: Mini-Step 1c is achieved on the production side, sustained for 35 years, and the industry’s prior on SAA characters in mainstream stories has not correspondingly updated. This requires stating the pipeline hypothesis precisely: not “SAA presence inside the industry changes the prior” but “SAA presence in the specific role of *development executive*, with the authority to greenlight at the project-selection stage, may change the prior.” That is a narrower and more testable claim.

M. Night Shyamalan extends the paradox to the director level. *The Sixth Sense* alone grossed over \$670 million worldwide—an SAA writer-director anchoring a major studio supernatural thriller franchise with his own ethnicity entirely incidental. And yet *The Last Airbender* (2010), in which Shyamalan was given full creative control over explicitly Asian-coded material, reproduced a whitewashing casting structure that MANAA characterized as placing every Asian-coded speaking character in the evil Fire Nation [MANAA, 2010]. The internalized prior (Pillar Four) operating without a demographically constrained greenlight chain—because Shyamalan was the creative authority—reproduced the exclusion pattern from inside.

4.7 The Pradeeps of Pittsburgh: A Cautionary Data Point

The Pradeeps of Pittsburgh (Amazon Prime, 2024) is worth noting precisely because it should, by the paper’s own logic, represent progress: an SAA family as central subject, a major studio (Amazon MGM / Sony), a creator with serious credits (*Black-ish*, *The Middle*), and a Pittsburgh setting. It was cancelled after one season.

The critical consensus is diagnostically useful. Reviewers across outlets converged on the same phrase in different words: the show felt like it belonged in 2005, trafficking in tired stereotypes that a decade or two of representational progress had rendered obsolete [Sioph Media, 2024]. One reviewer concluded that the show did more damage to the community it represented than it provided agency for its characters [Medium, 2025].

But the more fundamental problem, invisible to critics who are not South Asian Americans in Pittsburgh, is that the show’s premise is ethnographically false. The Pradeeps

arrive as an entrepreneurial family chasing the American dream in a working-class neighborhood, bumping up against their redneck neighbors—an immigrant narrative template borrowed from other communities that has almost nothing to do with how Indians actually come to Pittsburgh, or to most American cities with significant Indian populations. They come as graduate students: through Carnegie Mellon, the University of Pittsburgh, UPMC, the technology sector. They arrive with advanced degrees or are pursuing them. Their social world is university-adjacent from day one. The accent and the food and the name may be right, but the life circumstances are borrowed from a different immigrant experience entirely, and SAA viewers recognize the substitution immediately.

The show also reproduces, without apparent awareness, the romantic architecture Pillar Four identifies as an internalized prior: the SAA daughter's central storyline is her attraction to the white boy next door. That this appears in a show made by an SAA creator, with no greenlight chain demanding it, is consistent with the pattern's durability noted above.

This points to a failure mode the paper's staircase does not fully capture: the *false premise*. The stereotype baseline (Apu, Raj) is one failure mode—caricature. The false premise is a different one: a plausible-looking SAA family story built on a sociological template that does not match the actual community. Both fail to generate the recognition that makes content compelling to SAA viewers or credible to non-SAA viewers, but they fail differently and require different diagnoses.

The false premise also reveals a gap in the staircase itself. The Indian American graduate student or postdoc or junior faculty member simply living their life in Pittsburgh or Ann Arbor or Ithaca—for whom identity is not the dramatic subject, whose circumstances are defined by the university, the lab, the hospital, the startup—has essentially never appeared on American screens. This is Mini-Step 1c territory, and its absence is as significant as the absence of the dramatic lead or the antagonist. It is also, not coincidentally, the South Asian American that the vast majority of non-SAA Americans in university towns and technology corridors actually encounter—making it the representational gap with the most direct bearing on the daily-life hypothesis in Section 7.

What it proves: SAA creator plus major studio distribution plus cancelled after one season is a possible outcome, and not every SAA-led project advances the staircase. *What it reveals:* Ethnographic accuracy is a precondition for the kind of recognition that generates crossover engagement; and the graduate student pathway into American life, the most common route for Indian Americans in Pittsburgh and dozens of similar cities, remains entirely unrepresented.

4.8 The 2026 Academy Awards Snapshot

The 2026 Academy Awards provided a useful real-time snapshot of SAA industry presence: Geeta Gandbhir’s historic double documentary nomination; Alexandre Singh’s Best Live Action Short win; Kumail Nanjiani presenting [ANOKHI, 2026]. Real SAA presence— but almost entirely at Step One of the staircase. The staircase has most of its steps ahead of it.

4.9 Mapping Tables

Table 1: Table 1. The Stereotype Baseline

Work	Representational Move	Prior Installed and What It May Foreclose
Apu, <i>The Simpsons</i> (1989–2020)	Convenience store clerk; exaggerated accent; comic foreigner	SAA male as immigrant punchline. May foreclose complexity, leadership, interiority.
Raj, <i>Big Bang Theory</i> (2007–2019)	Nerd-sidekick; accent does the racial work; social deficiency as character	SAA male as technically able but socially deficient. May foreclose dramatic lead, moral complexity.
Post-9/11 “Arab-coded” terrorist (multiple)	Brown male body as national security threat	SAA male as presumptively foreign and threatening. Particularly damaging for Step 2 communities.
Dinesh, <i>Silicon Valley</i> (2014–2019)	Pakistani American engineer; competent but defined by neurosis and ethnic toggle jokes	Step toward Mini-1a but punchline-toggle ethnicity may reinforce “only one” prior; Indian American erasure within SAA category.
<i>The Pradeeps of Pittsburgh</i> (2024)	Indian immigrant family in working-class Pittsburgh; entrepreneurial premise borrowed from non-SAA immigrant template; cancelled after one season	False premise as distinct failure mode from caricature: ethnographically inaccurate SAA story may generate negative prior-updating data even with SAA creator and major studio distribution.

Five patterns. First, every positive talent-side example is concentrated at Step One. Second, *The Pitt*’s Dr. Mohan achieves Mini-Step 1c by trusting SAA identity to be unremarkable. Third, *Ghosts*’ Jay Arondekar has done the same at CBS primetime scale for five seasons, and the data has not been translated. Fourth, Shyamalan proves Mini-Step 1c is achievable at the director level—and that *The Last Airbender* shows Pillar Four operating without a greenlight chain to blame. Fifth, *Silicon Valley* demonstrates that a show sophisticated enough to satirize tech culture can nonetheless reproduce the “only one” prior, leave the Indian American engineer entirely absent, and never turn its satirical intelligence on the racial structure of the industry it depicts.

Table 2: Table 2a. Positive Examples: Literary and Prestige Drama

	1		SAA interiority at high literary level; insider SAA creator; prestige audience	Genre story; identity-incidental character; non-Bengali SAA; distribution channel trap in operation
<i>The Pitt: Dr. Mohan</i> (2025–)	1, Mini-1c		Identity-incidental SAA lead; two SAA characters coexist unremarkably; Emmy-winning	SAA lead outside medicine; non-Indian SAA; antagonist
<i>The Pitt: Javadi</i> (2025–)	1, Mini-1b		High-achiever trope rendered with psychological nuance	Full independence from model-minority reference point

5 What Exists and What Is Missing

SAADA. The South Asian American Digital Archive, founded in Philadelphia in 2008, provides archival and community infrastructure for any serious engagement with SAA creative history [SAADA, 2008]. Its Archival Creators Fellowship extends to communities marginalized even within the SAA community’s public self-presentation.

CAPE. The Coalition of Asian Pacifics in Entertainment runs pipeline programs with studio relationships including Netflix, Sony, Disney, NBCUniversal, Amazon, and Paramount+. Any serious experiment in this space should partner with CAPE rather than build parallel infrastructure. The gap is not in fellowship programs but in a theory of change connecting fellowship outcomes to prior-updating data.

What is missing. Three specific absences stand out. First: genre content with identity-incidental SAA leads distributed to mainstream audiences as genre content—not as SAA content—with crossover analytics that make the demand legible to a development executive. This category does not exist as a named, measured, investable thing. Second: a translation layer connecting audience data to greenlight-legible argument (Harold and Kumar proved there is an audience; *Ghosts* has been proving it on CBS for five seasons; neither dataset has been translated). Third: a distribution routing protocol ensuring that SAA-led genre content enters genre carousels—not multicultural or world cinema carousels—so that the data it generates reflects the mainstream crossover audience’s preferences.

6 Is Experimentation Worthwhile, and Who Should Fund It?

6.1 The Multi-Armed Bandit: A Lens, Not a Conclusion

The multi-armed bandit problem is a classical framework in operations research for sequential decision-making under uncertainty. Applied to content investment: the

Table 3: Table 2b. Positive Examples: Broadcast, Streaming, Comedy, Literary Fiction

—Ambudkar (CBS, 2021–)	1, Mini- 1c	SAA male lead in CBS primetime; identity fully incidental across 5+ seasons; mainstream broadcast audience	Mini-1d absent; translation layer connecting CBS data to greenlight argument never deployed (Pillar Five)
<i>Silicon Valley</i> —Nanjiani (2014–2019)	Val- 1a	1, Mini- 1a	Single SAA character in prestige tech comedy; some satirical joke deployment; six-season run
<i>Master of None</i> — Ansari/Yang	1, Mini- 1a/c	SAA showrunner changes content; identity contextual not definitional	Indian American erasure; no Mini-1c or 1d; racial structure of tech never examined; distribution channel trap
<i>Never Have I Ever</i> —Kaling	1, Mini- 1a	Young SAA female lead; wide streaming audience	Working-class SAA; non-Indian SAA; dramatic lead
<i>The Big Sick</i> — Nanjiani/Gordon	1–2	Pakistani American romantic lead works commercially; Harold-and-Kumar class data point	Beyond assimilation frame; Pakistani/Sri Lankan absent
<i>Harold & Kumar</i> (2004)	1, Mini- 1c/d	SAA co-lead in mainstream genre comedy; identity incidental; commercial franchise	Non-comedy Pakistani American narrative; translation layer again absent
			Industry read success as franchise-specific; translation layer absent; Pillar Five trap

arms are content types, the studio is the agent, the rewards are revenue and audience. Hollywood’s current strategy resembles pure exploitation. The prior over mainstream stories with SAA leads is pessimistic and thin. Given production costs of \$50–200 million per pull, pure exploitation is locally rational even if it produces a degenerate equilibrium in which the prior is never updated.

The framework suggests a role for exploration—lower-cost pulls on underexplored arms that could revise the prior and make subsequent studio investment rational. But the framework is a lens, not a prescription. Before asking who should fund exploration, it is worth asking whether exploration of this kind would work at all.

6.2 Is the Equilibrium Susceptible to Data?

The Harold and Kumar and Ghosts cases are read in this paper as translation failures: prior- updating data existed but was not converted into greenlight-legible argument. That reading assumes the equilibrium is data-responsive—that if the right data were presented in the right language, development executives would act on it.

Table 4: Table 2c. The Director and Producer Side

Ashok Amritraj / Hyde Park (1990–present)	1, Mini-1c (producer)	SAA producer at full mainstream scale; every major studio; \$2B revenues; identity incidental	Why producer presence has not updated the prior on SAA characters; gap between producer and development executive role
M. Night Shyamalan (1999–present)	1, Mini-1c (director)	SAA writer-director anchors major studio genre franchise; identity fully incidental; \$670M+ on <i>The Sixth Sense</i>	<i>The Last Airbender</i> shows Pillar Four at director level; industry prior has not updated
Ang Lee (1995–present) [Taiwanese American; not SAA]	—	Asian director at full mainstream Hollywood scale across three decades; extends Amritraj paradox	Industry prior on Asian characters has not updated

This assumption deserves scrutiny. An alternative reading of the same cases is that the prior is not merely thin but structurally defended: that the demographically constrained greenlight chain (Pillar Three) and the internalized prior (Pillar Four) together produce an equilibrium that is impervious to data, because the decision-makers who would need to act on it have career incentives, aesthetic preferences, and social networks that systematically discount it. On this reading, no amount of crossover analytics would move the needle, because the problem is not informational but political.

If the second reading is closer to correct, then the translation layer this paper calls for would be necessary but not sufficient—and the experiment would need to be designed with that possibility in mind from the outset, including explicit criteria for when to conclude that the data-responsiveness assumption has failed.

6.3 Is Philanthropy the Right Funder, or Simply the Available One?

If experimentation is worth attempting, philanthropy has structural properties that make it a plausible funder: longer time horizons than studio executives, no quarterly earnings pressure, and the ability to capture cultural returns that the market does not price. These are real advantages.

But they are not arguments that philanthropy is the *right* funder—only that it is a possible one. Several questions complicate the case:

Studios do fund exploration. First-look deals, development slates, and streaming diversity initiatives have all generated SAA content at scale. The question is whether those mechanisms have failed for structural reasons specific to SAA content, or whether this paper is overstating the gap that philanthropy would need to fill.

Different theories of change. Philanthropy optimizing for greenlight-legible data is a particular theory of change: making SAA content legible to studios on studios' own terms, in the hope that commercial logic will take over. A different philanthropic theory of change might invest in SAA audiences, critics, and community infrastructure directly, treating industry change as a longer-term downstream effect rather than the primary target. Both are coherent. This paper has a disposition toward the first, rooted in the Academic Capitalist instinct to find the missing category and prove it at low cost. But that disposition is not an argument, and the second theory of change may be more durable.

Who benefits from the experiment? An experiment designed to generate data for studio greenlight conversations is ultimately designed to make studios more willing to invest. That is a legitimate goal. But it is worth asking whether the primary beneficiary of a successful experiment would be SAA creators and audiences, or the studios whose investment decisions would be de-risked by the data. The answer is probably both—but the asymmetry matters for how the experiment is designed, who controls the data it generates, and what counts as success.

The donation-versus-experiment distinction. A donation funds a thing. An experiment funds a thing and measures what it learns. The Harold and Kumar failure is, on this reading, the failure of a donation masquerading as an experiment: the data existed but was never harvested, translated, or deployed. Whether a deliberately designed experiment would fare differently is an open question. The five pillars suggest specific mechanisms of failure; they do not guarantee that addressing those mechanisms would be sufficient.

These questions do not argue against experimentation or against philanthropic funding. They argue for entering either with eyes open about what could go wrong, and for designing the experiment with those failure modes explicitly named.

7 Representation and Daily Life: A Hypothesis

The comment “your English is good,” delivered warmly to a South Asian American professional by a stranger, is a useful data point. It is not primarily a status assertion. It is more often genuine cognitive error—an assumption formed by screen templates and never contradicted by experience. The comment is not randomly distributed. It is vanishingly rare in university settings, teaching hospitals, and consulting firms—environments with high direct contact between non-South-Asian and South Asian American professionals. It is substantially more common at the hardware store, the small-town restaurant, the regional airport.

This is a contact-as-correction story. Where South Asian Americans are present as colleagues and peers, the screen stereotype is contradicted by daily experience and weakens. Where they are absent—which is most of the country, most of the time—the

screen is the primary data source.

If something like this is right, then changing what appears on screen may not automatically change what gets said at the hardware store, but it could shift the cognitive baseline for the majority of Americans who will never work alongside a South Asian American. That is the hypothesis. I hold it tentatively.

8 Toward an Experiment: What the Diagnosis Requires

The REAP framework is diagnostic, not prescriptive. If the five pillars are even partially right, and if the questions in Section 6 are resolved in favor of attempting an experiment, they constrain what a well-designed intervention would need to address. This section derives those constraints conditionally—not as a blueprint, but as a way of making the prior questions more concrete. What would have to be true, and what would have to be built, for an experiment to have any chance of updating the prior?

8.1 What Pillar One Requires

The experience-good trap is maintained by thin prior data. The implication is that the experiment must generate prior-updating data at a cost the philanthropist can bear but the studio cannot justify. Short-form genre content with SAA leads, distributed cold to mainstream audiences as genre content, with demographic completion data attached—is the minimal viable pull. The data it generates is not “does anyone like SAA stories” but “do mainstream genre audiences complete stories with identity-incidental SAA leads when the story presents itself as genre.” That question has never been systematically answered.

8.2 What Pillar Two Requires

Oligopoly suppresses exploration by concentrating distribution in a small number of gatekeepers. The implication is that initial distribution must be outside the oligopoly: YouTube, TikTok, direct streaming—where the algorithm rather than a human gatekeeper determines reach. The data generated there is harder to suppress because it is public and platform-verifiable. The experiment cannot begin by pitching to studios. It must prove the category first.

8.3 What Pillar Three Requires

The demographically constrained greenlight chain is maintained by “industry lore.” The implication is that the experiment must generate data in the language greenlight conversations actually use: completion rate by demographic, cost per engaged viewer, retention curves by episode, demographic crossover ratios. The Harold and Kumar and Ghosts failures were partly failures of this translation.

8.4 What Pillar Four Requires

The internalized prior complicates the pipeline hypothesis. If SAA writers bring the same romantic architecture to genre rooms that Kaling and Lahiri bring to their own projects, placing SAA writers in rooms may not update the prior on Mini-Step 1c. The creative brief matters as much as the creative presence. The brief must specify what Mini-Step 1c looks like in terms of how the character’s interiority is organized, not just whether their identity is the subject.

8.5 What Pillar Five Requires

The distribution channel trap means that even content which clears the greenlight chain may fail to generate prior-updating data if it is routed incorrectly. The experiment must therefore include an explicit *distribution routing protocol*:

1. Content is submitted to genre platforms and carousels—not multicultural or world cinema carousels—so that the audience data reflects mainstream genre audience preferences.
2. Promotional materials are tested for categorical framing. If thumbnails or trailers foreground cultural markers (traditional dress, diasporic signifiers) even when the story is identity-incidental, they are revised before distribution.
3. Completion-rate data is reported by the audience segment in which the content was placed, not by the total audience. This allows the translation layer to distinguish between “SAA-self-selected audience completed this” (which does not update the prior) and “mainstream genre audience completed this” (which does).

8.6 The Missing Third Leg

Taken together, the five pillars describe an entertainment development pipeline with two established legs: community content serving SAA audiences, and mainstream genre content with white protagonists by default. The missing third leg is identity-incidental SAA leads in mainstream genre stories, distributed to mainstream audiences as genre content, with crossover analytics translated into greenlight-legible language. That category does not exist as a named, measured, investable thing.

8.7 Design Constraints

If an experiment is attempted, seven constraints emerge from the five-pillar diagnosis. These are not a blueprint but a checklist of what would need to be addressed for the experiment to have a reasonable chance of generating useful data rather than merely producing content:

1. **Generate category-level data, not project-level data.** The goal is to prove

that the category of identity-incidental SAA leads in genre stories generates mainstream crossover demand. Aggregate data across multiple projects.

2. **Distribute outside the oligopoly first.** Proof of concept must be generated where the algorithm, not a human gatekeeper, determines reach.
3. **Build the translation layer before the content.** A streaming analytics translator must be part of the experiment from Year 1, not added after data accumulates.
4. **Target development executives, not producers.** The Amritraj paradox shows that producer-level SAA presence does not automatically update the prior. Pipeline interventions should target the project-selection stage.
5. **Specify the creative brief.** Pillar Four means the brief matters. “SAA protagonist, genre story, identity incidental” is not sufficient if the romantic architecture reproduces the internalized prior. The brief must specify how the character’s interiority is organized, not just whether their identity is the subject.
6. **Specify the distribution routing protocol.** Content must enter genre carousels, not multicultural carousels; promotional materials must be tested for categorical framing; completion-rate data must be reported by audience segment.
7. **Design for sunset, not perpetuation.** The experiment should have a defined endpoint with explicit success criteria. If the category hypothesis is confirmed, the larger player completes the stool. If it is not confirmed, the experiment shuts down and the documentation becomes the legacy.

Success-metric protocol. The sunset clause requires specifying what success looks like. The following minimum threshold is proposed for category confirmation:

- Across at least three distinct genre projects, mainstream genre audience completion rate is within 15 percentage points of comparable white-protagonist content in the same genre and distribution window.
- At least one project generates sufficient crossover engagement that a streaming analytics translator can produce a greenlight-legible deck for a major studio development meeting.
- At least one major studio development executive commits to a greenlight conversation on the basis of the deck.

These thresholds are proposed, not established. They are offered to invite revision by practitioners with direct streaming analytics experience.

9 Conclusion: Questions, Not Answers

This paper has tried to do two things. First, to propose REAP—Representational Exclusion, Amplification, and Persistence—as a diagnostic framework for why SAA characters remain absent and distorted in mainstream American storytelling, built on five pillars: the experience-good trap, oligopoly amplification, the constrained greenlight chain, the internalized prior, and the distribution channel trap. Second, to ask whether the equilibrium is susceptible to deliberate intervention, whether small-scale experimentation could generate prior-updating data the industry will not produce itself, and whether philanthropy is the right funder of that exploration or simply the available one.

All of this is held loosely. The REAP framework may be wrong in ways I cannot see from where I sit. The assumption that the equilibrium is data-responsive may be the paper’s most contestable premise. And the theory of change embedded in the experiment design—that making SAA content legible to studios on their own terms is the right lever—is one theory among several, not the obvious conclusion.

The paper closes with three questions.

To SAA scholars: Does the fifth pillar—the distribution channel trap—capture something real about how platform routing interacts with the greenlight chain to suppress prior-updating data? Is the Pillar Four observation about the internalized prior recognizable in the literature, or am I seeing a pattern that does not hold up to closer reading? And is the equilibrium, as the literature understands it, susceptible to the kind of market-legible data intervention this paper imagines—or is the political economy of the greenlight chain resistant to data by design?

To entertainment industry professionals: Does the *Silicon Valley* analysis in Section 4.2 map onto something you have observed from inside: a show sophisticated enough to satirize an industry that still reproduces the “only one” prior and leaves the most statistically common SAA presence in that industry entirely absent from its character roster? What would it actually take to make five seasons of CBS primetime ratings with an SAA male lead legible in a greenlight conversation—and is there a version of the translation layer this paper imagines that you could see working?

To South Asian American philanthropists: Is the theory of change embedded in this paper—prior-updating data as the lever, studios as the target—the right one, or is there a more durable path through audience infrastructure, criticism, or community institutions? A Pakistani American donor with relationships in the Muslim American creative community would design a Step Two experiment this paper cannot. The constraints in Section 8 are offered as a starting point, not a monopoly.

The South Asian Americans I know are not on screen. The Deans, the McKinsey Senior Partners, the multi-billion-dollar CEOs, the surgeons, the teaching award winners—people who are socially fluent, accomplished, and fully human in ways the screen

has not found a way to portray. Whether the gap closes, and how, I do not know. But the diagnostic question seems worth asking carefully before the experimental one is answered—and the experimental question seems worth asking carefully before the money is committed.

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