

## What Is the Bamboo Ceiling and How Do We Break It?

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Most, if not all of us, are familiar with a concept called the Glass Ceiling. It refers to the barrier women face when trying to advance in their respective professions. In our most recent episode of *South Asian Voices*, we discussed a similar issue: the Bamboo Ceiling. [Click here to listen if you haven't yet. It will provide some great insight into the topic we're discussing today!](#)

"Bamboo ceiling" is a term that has been around since the 1980s but rose to prominence with a 2005 book, *Breaking the Bamboo Ceiling: Career Strategies for Asians*, by senior Forbes writer Jane Hyun. If you are familiar with the term "glass ceiling," then you can probably guess what the bamboo ceiling is.



The bamboo ceiling is, according to Jane Hyun, a "combination of individual, cultural, and organizational factors that impede Asian Americans' career progress inside organizations." We see it as the ugly truth of the model minority myth manifest.

[If you haven't read our first post on the myth of the model minority, check it out here.](#)

### The Bamboo Ceiling and the Model Minority

A "model minority" is a minority demographic perceived to be high-achieving and successful. In the United States, it historically refers to Asian and Jewish Americans. It is often used against African and Hispanic Americans. However, if we, the US, collectively perceive Asian Americans as high-achieving and successful, why don't the statistics reflect that?

In the recent *South Asian Voices* episode with Paurvi Bhatt, a local professional and philanthropist, we approached an answer to that question. She describes memories of childhood in the '60s, recalling some of the efforts her family made to integrate into the Minnesota community.

The traditional Indian clothes were largely confined to Indian events. English was the primary language in their home. Paurvi adjusted her name because it was difficult for her classmates and teachers to pronounce. Other friends had anglicized their names entirely.

As the new folks in the neighborhood, they felt it was important to blend into the community and social crowd. Yet, looking back on it, Paurvi recalls that being a model minority had a lot more to do with not being seen. The less different you are, the greater your chances of success.

There was even a point where, for all their efforts to make themselves a little more invisible, their upwards social mobility seemed to grind to a halt. "You then realize you're there, but not all the way there," she recalled.

Paurvi, like many others, found that finding success as a South Asian, as a Person of Color, often meant doing what she could to minimize her differences. However, many have found such efforts to be rewarded with finding the bamboo ceiling.

### The Problem With "Model Minority"

We discussed this in depth in the first post of our Model Minority series. [You can read that post here.](#) In summary, the myth is both projected onto and, to an extent, embraced by our community. After all, it is a stereotype that is disguised as a compliment.

However, the stereotype is artificial. For a long time, Asian immigrants were not permitted into the United States. When the law changed, only highly educated professionals were allowed. We have this perception in the US that Asians and Asian Americans are hardworking and successful, while conveniently forgetting that the US spent entire generations only permitting already-successful Asians to emigrate. Even though this is no longer the reality, the myth lives on, masking the very real struggles of the Asian American community.

In turn, our community has, by and large, bought into the myth. SEWA-AIFW has encountered this in our work — not all in our community want to acknowledge work done in domestic violence or mental health because it contrasts the mythic persona.

However, there is an issue we have not yet discussed. When one examines the model minority and the bamboo ceiling together, there's a disconnect. Asians are simultaneously believed to be hardworking and successful, and yet also increasingly underrepresented in positions of leadership and influence.

Furthermore, the myth and the bamboo ceiling work together to artificially create competition among Asian Americans, further dividing the community. In *South Asian Voices*, Paurvi spoke to a "scarcity mentality," where we view opportunities as limited. We compete with each other for a seat at the proverbial table.

But what if there was another way?

### Breaking the Bamboo Ceiling

The first thing we need to do is abandon our embrace of the model minority myth. The occasional benefit or compliment it affords us does not outweigh the harm it has done. How many of us need help but are afraid to ask for it? How many of us feel unworthy of our accomplishments because of the ever-present pressure to maximize our success?

The colonial psyche and imposter syndrome are real, and they are fueled by intense pressure to perform and be a model minority. We need to recognize that we are not competing with each other for a seat at the table, and we don't need to suppress our culture to make it there.

As Paurvi explained, we need to reframe the scarcity mentality into an abundance mentality. The opportunities are there. For those of us who make it to the table, don't let the door shut behind you. Hold it open, pull up more chairs, and make space. When we start to collectively view opportunities as abundant, we can create more opportunity for ourselves and others.

Finally, we need to have courage. A 2009 article in *Science* journal quoted an interesting statistic. Despite over 30% of Asian Americans facing workplace discrimination (the highest of any demographic), only 3% of formal complaints were filed by Asian Americans. [You can read that study here.](#)

Paurvi shared her own anxiety with asking and being proactive about opportunity. She had been waiting to be given an opportunity. It took time to realize that getting opportunities isn't just about tangible performance. Sometimes it's about having the courage to ask. We tend to view asking as needing help, when really it's about being proactive.

The artificially created competition by systemic racism and the model minority myth keeps representation low. Things are slowly changing, but the United States can do better. We can affect change while also retaining our South Asian heritage and identities.

When we band together in support and abandon the myth, our community can achieve true success on our own terms.

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[Click here to read the 2009 Science journal article.](#)

[Read an article on the history of racism against AAPI here.](#)

[Check out this NPR article on the dividing effects of the model minority myth.](#)

[Read an excerpt from Washington University on the origin of the phrase, "Model Minority," here.](#)

[Check out a compilation of stories related to the model minority myth from Asian Americans in the Law magazine, posted by Harvard Law School.](#)

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