

FROM EXILE TO CITIZENSHIP

Marina Budhos



It's inevitable that whenever I mention to people that I am half-Indian, and half-Jewish they always exclaim with tremendous pride, "Oh! Jews and Indians have so much in common!"

I usually laugh, because in some ways it's true: as a Kolkata friend once remarked to me, "Of course they're the same. They share eating and mothers who think nothing of telling someone else's child to put a warm hat on their head." I remember sitting in the audience of the popular BBC British skit show, "Goodness Gracious Me," where two mothers boasted about the accomplishments of their sons (doctors, of course), each upping the ante, until one proclaimed, "Well, my son is about to get the Nobel Prize, and yet he always remembers to call his mother every day!" Kvelling, it's called in Yiddish, and these two mothers could easily be the stock characters in a Jewish sitcom. I could go on and on -- the preponderance of doctors and engineers, meddlesome in-laws, etc. -- when I met my husband's huge Israeli clan I was handed from relative to relative; every time we

arrived at another house, it seemed they'd already been filled in on everything that had happened to us. I had never been surrounded by such chatter and lack of privacy -- except in India. Finally, the parallel was never as clear as the day I went for a check-up at the office of my eye doctor to find that next to Dr. Cohen's plaque was a new one for his partner -- Dr. Mehta.

There's a longstanding feeling, among Indians in particular, that Jews and Indians are a very select breed here in the U.S.: high-achieving, professional, model minorities who manage to hold on to their sense of culture and identity while enjoying the fruits of mainstream America. It only stands to reason that many look to the Jewish-American lobby as a potential model for not just Indians, but South Asians. But even I -- who can't resist making the comparisons, which are seemingly endless -- wonder if the analogy really holds. Beyond the jokes and the warm connection -- is the Jewish-American story really a valid model?

Many of the features we currently

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take for granted in the Jewish-American identity -- a strong Jewish lobby, Democratic Party politics, support for Israel, and Holocaust remembrance -- have actually evolved over time, and over several generations. And if South Asians are to look to Jewish-Americans as a model, then it's time to look backward and understand the unique circumstances that brought about their participation in America, and figure out whether this model truly makes sense for South Asians today.

In so many ways, the two histories could not be more different -- most Jews came to the U.S. under turn-of-the-century conditions to work in factories, while the bulk of South Asians arrived at the end of the century, largely for professional opportunities in a knowledge-based economy. At the same time, the Jewish-American story holds some interesting and valuable lessons that might be adapted in the years to come.

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First, a little history: the early Jewish immigrants, in the mid-19th century, were largely German-Jewish émigrés; they tended to be upper middle-class; some were very wealthy and made their fortunes in ventures like department stores and merchandising. So many products and institutions can be traced back to these families: Fleishman's margarine; the *New York Times*, still owned by the Sulzbergers; Levis jeans; and on and on. Though some remained Orthodox, most practiced Reform Judaism, which is a more secular, modern practice, and on the Upper

East Side of Manhattan they formed an elite society, and slowly began to influence the cultural life of New York and other cities: the Strauss family who owned Macy's, for instance, sponsored cancer wards, schools, and libraries.

At the turn of the century, though, a very different Jewish population surged to America. With pogroms sweeping across Russia, hundreds of thousands of Jews fled their *shtetls* (Jewish villages) for America, the land that was "paved in gold." This was also a time of intense recruitment -- America was in the midst of a massive industrial revolution and factories were drawing laborers from Southern and Eastern Europe. Most were poor, and even if they weren't, there was no turning back for Jews, since their homes were virtually destroyed. My grandparents came at the tail end of this immigration wave: when Cossacks crashed through their town, much of the family abandoned their haberdashery business, and slipped through Europe, working illegally until they could get across on a boat to Ellis Island. There, they began again as did so many immigrants teeming the New York City tenement streets.¹

Whatever politics grew out of this group was very much a working-class, labor-based movement. Many were already influenced by socialist ideals that were active in Europe, they formed trade unions, and published progressive newspapers. Jewish philanthropy organizations did everything from making sure women had adequate medical care, to educating girls, to buying up

grave plots so everyone could be buried. This was the heyday of the Ethnic Left, and within that, the Jewish Left also flourished. As a friend of mine who grew up in Brooklyn in the thirties remarked, "I always thought there were two parties in the U.S.: Socialist and Communist."

As that generation sent their children to school, the next group of Jewish-Americans was most affected by the Depression and the New Deal. If Jews were earlier defined by their membership in unions, now they were also shaped by their profound support for Franklin Delano Roosevelt, whose policies, literally, helped them survive. This was a generation that filled the brick school buildings and public universities to become doctors and teachers. Jews were moving up and out of the ghettos, and it was the second and third generations who were joining the professional classes.

After the war, yet another population began to straggle in -- the few survivors of the death camps. Privately, it was often a galvanizing experience: here in the U.S. Jews were finally starting to feel at home, only to have the gruesome past of anti-Semitism rise up before them. For some it translated into a "never again" philosophy that took shape in the support of the newly created state of Israel. But publicly, Jews were still outsiders, not allowed into most elite clubs, universities, or neighborhoods. In fifties America, American Jews just wanted to fit in. They changed their names, dyed their hair, and fixed their noses.

They wanted access; they wanted to be "regular" Americans. That's all that mattered.

There is, in Judaism, the idea that Jews must first make sure they provide for their own, then they must reach out to others, particularly the disadvantaged. In America, for the early generations, this meant creating burial societies, labor organizations, and philanthropies for the sick, the indigent, and new refugees. When American Jews felt more secure in their identity, it was time to extend outward to a simmering injustice in America -- racial segregation. The next generation came of age just as the civil rights movement broke in America, and it was this that defined them, more than anything else, partly driven by their own haunting sense of marginalization and oppression, and a history of seeking justice through the law.

A number of Jews, from "old lefties" to idealistic college students began joining in the protests and sit-downs. The list could go on and on -- from Sandy Koufax, the beloved baseball player who found common cause with black players, to the Jewish lawyers who worked with the NAACP, the National Advancement of Colored People. Though no one could argue that those alliances were perfect -- after all, you had Northern liberal Jews, many of them middle-class, joining forces with black organizers from the poor, Deep South. The movement was most certainly a product of its times, and it would shatter a decade later. But it was a remarkable moment of political alliances, one

we have never seen since.

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It was into this moment that South Asians began arriving in the U.S. 1965 was an amazing watershed year: civil rights legislation and new immigration quotas were enacted, ensuring that America's demography was about to change dramatically. The new quotas were aimed largely at educated professionals with technical skills, and South Asians, freshly graduated with engineering and medical degrees, were eager to take advantage of these new opportunities. If, during the industrial revolution, the U.S. needed workers for factories, now the nation was turning to the Third World for educated professionals for what's been loosely termed the "knowledge revolution." This continued, at a steady and strong pace, through the late eighties and well into the nineties, particularly with the technology boom. That group -- middle-class, residing everywhere from Houston, Texas suburbs to New York City boroughs, began to define the "South Asian" immigration.

In the early years, many South Asians experienced outright discrimination and very rough racism; during the eighties in cities such as Jersey City, there was an outbreak of "dot-busters;" violence against Indian shopkeepers and new South Asian residents. More affluent areas also had their share of incidents, but the wave of attacks was also linked to the transformation that America was undergoing -- cities such as Jersey City, which had

become decrepit and abandoned by immigrant groups that had moved on, were susceptible to tension with the arrival of new immigrants into these impoverished areas. At the same time, it was the influx of those immigrants that have led to profound transformations in those cities: they are now vital, multi-ethnic hubs.²

Like any immigrant group, South Asians around the country organized local groups through temples and cultural associations; women's organizations also sprang up, combating issues such as domestic violence. Unlike earlier immigrant groups, the concerns of this burgeoning South Asian population were less that of survival, and more of forming a community. And unlike other Asian-American groups, South Asians retained a much clearer interest in foreign policy and the politics of their homeland. The second generation that emerged arrived on college campuses and organized more around issues of cultural identity, forming groups alongside the other ethnic groups that are very much a part of the multicultural college campus.

Yet in the past few decades, even the category "South Asian" has begun to take on different meanings, divided between those that have largely grown up in the U.S., and those that came here as adults, for either graduate school or jobs. The newly arrived graduate from a technical school is less concerned about cultural identity, since he or she has been formed by growing up on the Subcontinent. The second genera-

tion "desis," however, whose parents can be Westernized, are often looking for a way to reconnect with their own identities within the American landscape, and especially once they leave the family and are mingling on a mixed college campus. Add to this the immigration status of South Asians who arrived during the technology boom, under temporary visas, which do not necessarily lead to citizenship, making their status in the U.S. highly ambiguous.

For South Asians, arriving in the U.S., many have felt a sense of outsiderhood that is similar to the experience of Jews. They occupy an ambiguous place in America's racial map: they are considered the "model minority" because of their professional and educational levels, and yet they can also be seen as brown outsiders. It's an uneasy status. One hears stories, frequently, of well-trained doctors who can never get positions in the most acclaimed hospitals, or engineers who always feel, somehow, there is a glass ceiling checking their rise. However, relative to the history of ethnic groups in the U.S. (East Asians and Hispanics, for instance), South Asians have done remarkably well in the U.S.: their per capita income is the highest of any ethnic group, and it is not uncommon for well-trained immigrants to settle comfortably into the American middle class within years of arrival. Educated South Asians have achieved a remarkable level of visibility and success in a short time -- something that would be utterly unthinkable for other groups.

However, there is another side to the South Asian immigration. Because "South Asian" has always been dominated by middle-class Indians, many other groups have been lost in our understanding of what we mean by South Asian: less visible are the Pakistani cab drivers, the Punjabi construction workers, the Tibetan refugees who grew up in India; the Sri Lankan domestics; the Indo-Caribbean nannies, all of whom are struggling to survive in the U.S. They are part of a broader immigration wave that really began in earnest in the mid-nineties: low-wage, low-skill workers who are filling in the menial "niches" of developed economies throughout the world.

At the same time, I don't think it makes sense to look back, with misty-eyed nostalgia, to America's Jewish and ethnic working class movements as a model for building a South Asian political base or identity. Unlike that earlier era, when literally, millions of immigrants were unified in their experiences, this post-65 immigration is far more varied. The Jewish-American identity began out of a very clear, unified sense of survival of working people living in turn-of-the century conditions, evolving outward to their citizenship in America. The South Asian experience, like all immigrants today, is far more diffuse and scattered. We are no longer an industrial nation with politics governed by unions protesting American corporations, but a globalized economy where a South Asian immigrant could easily be an employee of a multi-national corporation based in

several countries. A South Asian immigrant, unlike his or her counterpart from the Jewish-American past, may be saving all his money to retire in India or Pakistan, and spends all his holidays going back, visiting relatives.

Despite the success of South Asians in the U.S., what's striking is that it is not matched by an equivalent sense of political or cultural arrival. South Asians may be the "model minorities," but they may be, perhaps, too well-behaved, too adept at fitting in, too career-wise (which also reflects our times). We have witnessed the Indian writer's boom, but most of those writers came to us from India, via England, and they often write of dislocation and diaspora, not belonging. Increasingly South Asians are appearing on the media -- Fareed Zakaria is now one of our most senior and respected commentators on foreign affairs.

Yet there are few Indian political candidates in our elections; South Asian organizations exist all over the country, but how much of an impact do they have on mainstream American politics, or even the culture at large? How many South Asians belong to and are active in non-South Asian political organizations? South Asians may be outwardly successful, but do they, inside themselves, feel a deep sense of belonging, that they can get out there and influence their new country? Run for office? Change policy? Put forth a vision of justice that is distinctly South Asian?

Some if this is understandable: No

matter how economically successful a group is, for all immigrants, there is still a long period of cultural tentativeness and a loyal attachment to homeland. The events after September 11th, and the subsequent attacks and harassment of South Asians certainly did not help this much. For any immigrant -- be it the shopkeeper who works sixteen hours a day or the software engineer clocking his hours in Silicon Valley -- the first years of arrival are about the single-minded pursuit of proving and establishing oneself. If, in an earlier era, immigrants "took care of one's own," by providing for their families and establishing support organizations, South Asians are doing the same, simply by working very hard, getting graduate degrees, buying houses, paying their mortgages, and sending their children to school.

During the last presidential election, *Wall Street Journal* columnist Tunku Varadarajan wrote a piece complaining about Senator Joseph Lieberman's political identity as an outsider -- after all, Varadarajan noted, Lieberman went to Yale! I was amazed that he did not know that Lieberman would have been lucky to get in to Yale, given the strict quotas at Ivy Leagues at the time. It may be hard for South Asians to fathom how Jews could have celebrated Lieberman's Vice Presidential nomination as the sign of their arrival, since they seem like the quintessential insiders. But it also reflected to me, how comfortable South Asians themselves are without realizing it. Varadarajan, for one, occupies a position at the

Journal that no Jew could have hoped to have decades before. Even those who critique America -- as well they should -- do it from a comfortable position of being professors, journalists, and business people.

I find South Asians exhibit a curious ambivalence with respect to their political identity: they have both a prideful sense of accomplishment that sets them apart from "other" minorities, and yet also ignores their class privilege and superior educational backgrounds. At the same time, they can be very sensitive about any perceived slight or cultural insult or discomfort from Americans; there's a kind of prideful sense of place, and yet a reflexive sense of injury or inclusion. This is an odd combination, for it doesn't make for a very vigorous political profile: it is both assertive and withdrawn, and lacking in a clear sense of what they want to claim within the American landscape.

There is also the nature of today's immigration, where people can shuttle back and forth internationally, and keep much stronger ties to their families back home. The "up" side to this is that today's immigrants do not experience the profound loss and dislocation that prior groups experienced, where there was no going back. The "down" side is that in some ways, the very nature of citizenship is diluted (as it is everywhere now, given the forces of globalization). Fostering a greater sense of participation means starting to step out beyond a specific commu-

nity into a broader civic life.

I don't believe that all minorities need to be lumped together, given their disparate experiences and backgrounds. Nor do I think that given some terrible downturn in the economy, will South Asians be singled out. But I do believe South Asians, as "model minorities," could use a dose of looking at their privilege -- which is considerable -- and understanding better the dynamics that have historically left others out in America; how they are participating in a racially divided America; a split that continues to fester in our social landscape.

For instance, why do so many ethnic groups, within a short time of coming here, become prejudiced against African-Americans -- a group they hardly know and have little experience with? Is it simply that African-Americans in this country are often associated with crime, low education, and the underclass? Not entirely. More, it has to do with the power of divided America and how that comes to work on our collective imagination. The U.S. has a long history of ethnic groups entering the country with a very local, specific identity -- an Italian from Genoa, for instance -- and through their immigration, absorbing racial attitudes toward "undesirables," to "become white." Assimilation, for these groups, means pulling away from the downtrodden and marginal, and identifying with those who have power.

Given the pressures of America's racial politics, immigrant groups

often feel they must make a choice: do they identify with those in power or do they ally with the marginalized? I believe there is a way to do both, to not accept these simplistic polarities. Middle-class South Asians have vast advantages -- they immigrated into an America that was far more receptive than the country to which previous groups came, fortified by civil rights laws that were fought for by previous minority groups. For many reasons, they take for granted that the second and third generations should be able to attend the best colleges and universities. To me, it makes sense to use the tremendous advantages they have to create more, particularly for those sub-groups who are not as advantaged.

It is here that the Jewish-American story might give us some help: a group can succeed and aspire to power and influence in the U.S., while retaining some sense of identification with those who are not as easily brought into the fabric of American life. Jews found this expression through civil rights and a consistent support of the Democratic Party.

What would be the South Asian equivalent? In a world that is deeply divided between the economies North and South, South Asians are in a unique position: they have immigrated from the South, but they partake of the wealth that is so concentrated in the First World. Yet surely one of the greatest challenges facing us is how to close the gap between rich and poor nations. Even as they drive their S.U.Vs and

send their children to Ivy Leagues, can South Asians make use of their cultural place to confront this divide? Do South Asians have a particular stance or point of view on issues such as free trade agreements, taxation, participation in the U.N., support of NGOs? What of the prolonged detainment of Muslims by the INS and FBI post-September 11th -- might this be defined as a "South Asian" issue? How can South Asians contribute meaningfully to the current political climate where issues of terrorism, immigration, and foreign policy are on the front burner?

Part of the Jewish-American story is the tale of outsiders who took on American culture. This was an assimilationist era, and for generations long exiled and excluded, they were hungry to take on the culture by storm. For instance, Jews went into media, Hollywood, movies and television, because WASPs disdained those industries. Along with ethnic Italians, Jews completely reinvigorated and changed modern advertising in the early fifties and sixties, and shook up a dull and formulaic industry. They became the modern expressionist artists in the post-war years; the choreographers and directors who shaped American theater. I offer this not to parade these accomplishments with parochial pride, but to note that the energy that was unleashed by groups that had long been excluded changed American culture forever.

Every immigrant wave brings with it the astonishing power to transform and reinvigorate America. South

Asians, particularly during the technology boom, certainly did the same. And among the second-generation, a new, creative energy is starting to burble to the surface: I see it in the theater groups, the indie film companies, the South Asian galleries that are cropping up in New York, Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, Houston. I see it every time I attend another "South Asian" event and am stunned by the sheer number of young people who simply show up. I see it in the films of Mira Nair, who has learned to popularize her uniquely Indian point of view and sensibility and bring it to American audiences.

But this is just the beginning. To belong is to participate. To take care of one's own, and move beyond. And now, more than ever, is the time to do so.



1. The Jewish story is not quite parallel to the South Asian story, and certainly not the Indian story, which, despite the rise of low-wage immigration, is still dominated by middle-class professionals who have come here for economic opportunity, not political persecution. In fact, the South Asian immigration to England far more accurately mirrors the Jewish immigration, since this was largely working-class, and included South Asians from Africa, who had been expelled and sent into exile. The trajectory of British-Asians—from shopkeepers to the brutal racism they encountered to their rise in politics and the media—more closely approximates the experiences of Jews in America.
2. A mark of the change that cities

such as Jersey City have undergone is that this year, two South Asian students won the prestigious Westinghouse Science Awards. Given that this was an area that educators and politicians once thought of as hopeless and underachieving, nothing better demonstrates the power and impact of immigrant energy in the U.S.