

# A MOVE TO THE RIGHT? THE SHIFTING SANDS OF SOUTH ASIAN AMERICAN POLITICS

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The majority of Indian Americans and other immigrant citizens from South Asia has long been considered a solid support for the Democratic Party. As the party identified with the advancement of minority rights and interests, the Democratic Party naturally attracted first-generation immigrants from South Asia as it had immigrant citizens from East Asia, Eastern Europe, and Latin America. The arrival of important numbers of immigrants from the subcontinent in the wake of immigration law reform in 1964 coincided with the cresting wave of the Civil Rights movement, a movement associated with the American Left. Recent immigrants from India could immediately relate to Martin Luther King's strategy of non-violent resistance, a strategy directly inspired by Mahatma Gandhi.

While immigrants from South Asia could readily sympathize with the struggle of African Americans for equal rights and equal opportunity, the African American culture, a struggle which echoed India's own struggle for independence and decolonization, remained

both mysterious and threatening to many, some of whom held, frankly, racist views. Soon enough, the incredible success of post-1964, professional-class South Asians propelled many of them away from the concerns of fellow citizens of color and into the whitest reaches of privileged American suburbia. Successful South Asians in America aspired to be identified with other successful Americans, and this generally meant white Americans. Conversely, this meant distancing themselves from the American underclass, largely identified with African Americans. Still, based on such evidence as is available,<sup>1</sup> the Democratic Party, the party of choice for African Americans, also remained the party of choice for most South Asian Americans for the next several decades. Whether it remains so today is an open question.<sup>2</sup>

In my conversations with a range of South Asian opinion leaders, journalists, and political activists, I have come to believe that a shift away from the Democratic Party and toward the Republican Party may well be under way

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among South Asian Americans, particularly among Indian Americans and those who are second-generation, American-born or, at least, American-raised. There are many factors that might be contributing to this shift: the change to a Republican administration in 2000, the attacks on September 11, 2001, the ensuing War on Terror, and the popularity of President George W. Bush among Americans in general. Many children of first-generation immigrants have received a superior education, which has prepared them for successful careers in their own right. I have heard many such young people express doubts about the need for such things as, say, affirmative action: after all, their parents and they, themselves, did spectacularly well, they believe, without it. Amazingly, this belief has held true despite record unemployment following the collapse of the information technology bubble and a recessionary economy that has been teetering on the edge of a full-blown depression for months.

Achievements to the contrary, these superstar kids are desperately insecure about their identity and their place in a country that their parents have adopted and that they now call their own. Their parents are equally terrified of losing their American-born children to a culture that remains fundamentally foreign to them, of watching success morph into assimilation and, then, disappearance into the yawning maw of the Anglo-American mainstream. As I have criss-crossed the country over the last two years reading from my memoir, *Motiba's Tattoos: A Granddaughter's Journey from America into Her Indian Family's Past*,<sup>3</sup> I have met with hundreds of immigrants from South Asia who, they say, identify with many aspects of my story about an

immigrant family's journey from the subcontinent to America. The most persistent questions I am asked, and the most poignant, concern identity insecurity.

"Here you are not even looking like an Indian. Your mother was not an Indian, and yet you have maintained such strong ties to your heritage. Even my own children do not know Hindi. How can we make sure they stay attached to India and to their heritage?" beseeches an anxious mother.

"You know, I could, like, really relate to when you talked in the book about not knowing where you fit in, like about the different food you ate at home and stuff, because, like, I was never sure where I fit in in school and stuff. In elementary school, I was, like, the only Indian kid and nobody understood anything about my culture," declares a college student.

It isn't only the "Indian-American Princess" types from the suburbs and the Ivy-League wannabes and their parents who are racked by identity insecurity. This deep insecurity is compounded for immigrants from Pakistan and Bangladesh and their children, especially after 9/11 and the deep suspicion with which they and other Muslims in America are now viewed. Successful Indian Muslim, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi Americans, like almost all Muslim Americans now, are nervous about ways in which their loyalty may be questioned. Among the working class, many people's immigration status is unclear. Many are being deported or are under threat of deportation. In the case of kids and young adults, the United States is often the only country of which they have any conscious memory, even if

they lack a U.S. passport. Their whole bearing--shoulders sort of hunched in, eyes wary, baggy pants--speaks volumes about their level of comfort in mainstream Anglo and Christian America.<sup>4</sup> Most of these kids have gotten the distinct impression that they will never be accepted as "real" Americans, yet, nowhere else feels like home either. Best to lie low, keep your head down, and hope nobody notices you, or you could be on the next flight out. These kids are not future Republican leaders of America. To the extent that their immigration status may be questionable, they aren't future Democrats either. They are absolutely disenfranchised in the only country they know.

The question of what it is to be an American has become infinitely complicated post-9/11. Where I live in southwestern Washington State, neighborhoods and cars--mostly pick-up trucks and SUVs--are so festooned with flags and yellow ribbons it's hard to tell, sometimes, what kind of landscaping people really have in their front yards. In wartime, America's great ethnic mosaic has historically been subject to a little purification. Yesterday's Japs have given way to today's Arabs (a vague category that in the popular imagination includes anyone who remotely looks like a cartoon caricature and often includes South Asians of all religions). The tenor of the current time reminds me of nothing so much as the portraits of Pétain, France's fascist leader during World War II, under whose stern face the French people were asked: "Are you more French than he is?" Who would dare answer, "Yes"? Are you more American than George W. Bush? Are you, a recent immigrant from India with brown skin, a funny accent, and a wor-

shiper of Hindu idols, really American? Are you, a Muslim, a true American? Prove it.

Which brings me to one of the least savory motivators of a South Asian shift to the Republican Right. How better to prove one is a real, true-blue American than by waving an American flag during wartime? Or, failing that, jumping on the Republican bandwagon of patriotism which is, more often than not, pitched as subscribing unquestioningly to the current administration's policies on foreign affairs, the environment, civil rights, women's rights, taxation, and "voodoo" economics, as Bush *père* put it so well. The Republican Party has succeeded in positioning itself as the party of might and of right; the party of victors in Iraq and in business; the party that speaks for minorities.

Wait a minute on that last point. Say what?

In case you haven't been paying attention, the Republican Party has been not so quietly pursuing a strategy of "inclusiveness" designed to capture traditionally Democratic, minority voting blocs away from the Democratic Party. It has made no secret about going after the Hispanic vote, whether in Texas or among traditionally Republican-leaning Cuban-American voters in Florida. It has not been shy about hawking the potential dividend among Jewish-American voters--historically strongly Democratic--for both its success in Iraq and its unbending support for the right-wing Sharon government of Israel.<sup>5</sup> Sharon's argument that America's War on Terror and his own war against the Palestinians are one and the same fight has gone down virtually without ques-

tion in a Washington dominated by pro-Likud neo-conservatives.<sup>6</sup> Using the same kind of political double-speak the Republican Party has used for years to communicate a racist message to those Southern whites who want to hear it while paying public lip-service to equal rights for all Americans, the Bush administration has been able to make sure--official statements about the notion that Muslim Americans can be real Americans aside--that those who want to hear it get the message about the common Muslim enemy in the War on Terror.

Among those listening are many Hindu Indian Americans. To my shame, I have heard scores of educated, cultivated, urbane Indian Americans--including some in my own family--openly spout in the wake of 9/11 the most vicious anti-Muslim screeds. "Now Americans will understand that Muslims are all over alike. We should exterminate them all." India rushed to emulate America's response to the attacks of September 11 in its own struggle against cross-border terror by Pakistan-based groups. When the Bush administration proposed and secured approval of the Homeland Security Act authorizing sweeping powers to detain and spy on American citizens, the BJP-led government of Vajpayee put through POTA, the Protection of Terrorism Act, conferring similar powers, many of which were directed against Indian Muslims on the barest of pretexts or on no pretext at all. Like Israel, India made it clear that its own anti-terror struggle was of a piece with that of the United States. Many Hindu Americans approved wholeheartedly.

However, the United States disappoint-

ed India when it didn't declare war on Pakistan, one of global terror's prime safe-havens (something I don't dispute), and, instead, actually allied itself with Pakistan and proceeded to give it millions of dollars and all sorts of goodies in exchange for using Pakistan to stage the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan. Fed up with American policies towards Pakistan, facing ongoing terrorist incursions, and inspired by the success of the United States' pre-emptive war against Iraq, India is now trumpeting the logic of a pre-emptive attack against Pakistan. As they did when India tested a nuclear device a decade ago, many Indian Americans are applauding. Imitation may be the sincerest form of flattery, but the United States--not to mention South Asia--could do without this one.

My impression from meeting young Hindu Indian Americans across the country is that they generally fall into two camps: on the Right, there are those who support the Bush administration's War on Terror and feel that they, since they aren't Muslim or terrorists, have nothing to fear from it. If they are financially successful, which many assume they will be, then they feel that the Republican Party's tax policies can only benefit them. On the Left, there are those who feel that they are as likely as anyone from the subcontinent to be the victim of everything from anti-Muslim hate-crimes to anti-foreign discrimination to the over-zealous workings of a newly aggressive Immigration and Naturalization Service. There are a great many young people involved in progressive politics, be it Gay rights, women's rights and the prevention of domestic violence, or anti-war efforts.

On the Right, many young people take

their views as much from what they have learned in the popular youth programs sponsored by Hindu extremist groups such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad as from the news on the Fox network. The influence of Hindu extremist groups on an emerging generation of Hindu Indian Americans cannot be underestimated. Many Hindu Indian parents in the United States have resorted to these youth programs in a desperate bid to keep their children connected to their culture. Like most immigrants, the memory of their home country, India, becomes, as the years go by, idealized to a point where it no longer has much resemblance to the current reality of the country. Their children, insecure about their identity and largely ignorant about India, are easily convinced that the ideology of militant Hindutva imbibed along with Indian folk dances and religious skits represents a true and essential link to a Hindu identity they can claim as their own. I have actually had second-generation, high-school and young college students express to me their surprise upon discovering, when they finally actually visited India, that their own cousins in Mumbai or Kolkata dressed in Western clothes, liked to go out clubbing, didn't know how to properly wear a sari, and didn't know any of the folk dances so popular in, say, Illinois. (This is not terribly different from the experience of my Danish-American family who found, when they finally visited Denmark in the 1960s, that the folk dances they'd learned and performed every year at the Scandinavian Festival in Junction City, Oregon, hadn't been danced in Denmark since the 19th century.)

At a recent reading, the young Indian American woman who led off a panel

discussion of my book, an attractive graduate student raised in the United States who spoke eloquently about her own struggles in forging a new identity in America, got up after the program to invite all the young people in the room to a Youth Conference to be held at the local Hindu Temple Society. I admired her spunk in taking over the podium for her own purpose and later looked up the web site she'd cited.<sup>7</sup> Why was I not surprised to see that the entire first section of the day's program, one-third of the whole affair, was devoted to the topic, "Exploration of our cultural identity," with the following bullet points:

- ◆ How do you identify yourself?
- ◆ What affects your sense of identity?
- ◆ Do you envision your identity to change?

The rest of the program was devoted to, "Spectrum of our Hindu religious philosophies," and, "Vision for our future," which included both, "How do you envision Hindu religion in your life?" and, "What is your vision for cultural and community activism?"

Now, on its face, there is absolutely nothing wrong with this. I'm sure the Hindu Temple Society provides genuine religious and community comfort to thousands of fine individuals with a variety of specific beliefs. One can easily find the exact same sort of thing on the web sites of Christian (minus the identity portion, perhaps) and Jewish religious organizations. But it is an undeniable fact that the VHP of America and the Overseas Friends of the BJP derive significant financial support from Hindus in America, reaching many through their temples, and that the VHP, in particular, has been assiduously

seeking to win the hearts, minds, and pocketbooks of young Hindu Indian Americans for years. I encourage readers to visit these organizations' web sites, as well as the Hindu Students Council ([www.hscnet.org](http://www.hscnet.org)) where the "search for roots" combining *garba* and *dharmā* is well under way as well.

Now, I love a good *bhangra* party as much as the next person. The incredibly fertile cultural dynamic emerging among first- and second-generation immigrants from South Asia in the United States is quite sensational and something to be celebrated, whether it is the films of M. Night Shyamalan or the fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri or the musical nights of DJ Rekha in New York, to name just a few examples. I believe that the community is only beginning to have an impact on the cultural life of the United States and that its influence will grow dramatically during the next decade and beyond. In fact, a new Indian American identity is being forged every day in countless ways, and it is precisely the fact that it is neither a carbon copy of Indian or other subcontinental identity nor a white-washed assimilation into Anglo America--the fact that it is plural, dynamic, and changing--that makes it interesting and valuable.

Hindu temples and organizations in the United States provide more, alas, than *garba* and *dharmā* for Hindu youth. Millions of dollars donated to Hindu organizations and temples in the United States, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere, often by unwitting participants, have been directly traced to the funding of the most vicious anti-Muslim activities, including the pogrom in Gujarat in the spring of 2002.<sup>8</sup> The most sensation-ally documented case involves the IDRF

(India Development and Relief Fund), an organization that has been receiving funding under no less a respectable umbrella than the United Way.<sup>9</sup>

While I would be the last person to accuse the Bush administration of explicitly condoning organizations such as the IDRF that support terror abroad, I wouldn't be surprised if the Bush administration's posture toward the BJP-led government of India's hard line policies toward India's Muslims, which it has made every effort to associate fully with Pakistani terrorists, is, on the domestic side, calculated to win votes--not to mention campaign contributions--from successful Hindu Indian Americans. The Bush administration has made no secret that it will not be disappointed if its War on Terror (too often read as a war on Muslims) and its support of the Sharon government's hard line toward Palestinians reaps support from Jewish American voters in the United States and tempts them away from the Democratic Party. Why not use the same tactics to attract Indian American voters with deep pockets?

Despite the strong recommendation this past March by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom that the Department of State designate India a "Country of Particular Concern" due to the comportment of local, state, and national governments during the violence in Gujarat in the spring of 2001 and the ongoing government-sanctioned insecurity of India's Muslim population, especially in Gujarat, Colin Powell declined to do so.<sup>10</sup> This follows total silence on the part of the Bush administration on state-sanctioned violence during and in the aftermath of the Gujarat pogrom.

Meanwhile, and quite properly, the Bush administration has taken every opportunity to issue prompt condemnations of terrorist incursions into India from Pakistan. This unbalanced posture is certainly designed to soothe tempers in New Delhi already aroused by the U.S. alliance with Pakistan, but it also cannot help but send a message to Hindu militants in the United States that the government of the United States is quite on their side when it comes to Muslims.

It seems that some young Indian Americans have heard this message loud and clear. When Marine Reservist Nishkam Gupta, 21 years of age, enlisted in order to participate in the war in Iraq, he did so because of his desire to "fight the larger war against terrorism, a war that would directly benefit Hinduism and its cause."<sup>11</sup> According to his parents, "He said that is the beginning for a much bigger, much more important war."<sup>12</sup> One can only imagine what that is. At the same time, whereas India's government declined to support (or to explicitly condemn) the United States taking unilateral action in Iraq, delicately expressing their regret over the Security Council's inability to reach a consensus on the matter, there were enthusiastic grassroots demonstrations of support for the venture in Gujarat, the state in India most thoroughly taken over by militant Hindu nationalists<sup>13</sup> and from which a disproportionate number of Indian Americans, including my own family, hails.

But does any of this prove that there is a shift to the Right, which translates, in part, into a shift to the Republican Party, among South Asian Americans or among Indian Americans, in particular? It does not. Not yet, at any rate. The

South Asian Americans I spoke with active in party politics on both sides were surprisingly in agreement on a couple of key points. First, that the community, at 1.7 million persons, is still too small, too fragmented, and too politically disorganized to afford to let itself be driven by Democratic versus Republican party politics. According to Hitesh Patel, who runs the Colorado-based, National Asian Indian Republican Association, "We work with Asian Indian Democrats because we have similar goals for the community, and we just don't have the numbers to reach them separately." He also opined that Indian Americans would vote according to their basic economic interests. "At the end of the day, they will vote their pocketbook."<sup>14</sup> This is why he thinks that, ultimately, the Republican Party will become more attractive for a community with a high business acumen. Surprisingly, one of his Democratic peers, Ram Koduri, President of the Chicago-based, Indo-American Democratic Organization, agrees with him. He wrote me, "In Illinois, we supported heavily democrats [sic] and they won; needless to say the COMMUNITY WILL BE WITH WINNERS AND WORK WITH WINNERS" (capitalization his). If they want to retain the South Asian American vote, Democrats had better be seen to be winners! Interestingly, he also wrote that how Indian Americans vote in the future may be anyone's guess, that "elsewhere it is to be seen within next two years."<sup>15</sup>

One of the most important factors in the future party allegiance of South Asian Americans may simply be the question of timing. As a relatively recent immigrant group, it is only now that significant numbers of immigrants from the subcontinent are United States

citizens and, of these, native-born. There is far greater visible participation by South Asian Americans in the Bush administration, from the level of junior staffers to the level of Neil Patel, legal counsel to Vice President Dick Cheney, than during both Clinton administrations. There are simply more qualified individuals who have grown up in the American political environment than ever before. Many will have ended up working in the Bush administration for no other reason than because that was the administration in power when they began their careers. If George W. Bush is re-elected to a second term, the experience of a significant portion of the up-and-coming generation of talented South Asian Americans going into government and politics will be shaped by careers that began and flourished under a Republican administration.

By now it will be evident that my own political convictions lie on the progressive side and that I believe that only the Democratic Party can deliver a true politics of inclusion -- not to mention a reasonably protected environment, sound economic policy, women's rights, affirmative action, respect for international institutions and the rule of law, and all the other things I feel are important to the future of this country. The South Asian American community doesn't lack for Democratic leaders, progressive political groups, or even groups on the fringes of the American Left. But, like the community itself, the Democrats and the Left are in need of a galvanizing leader and a message around which a credible political challenge to the Bush administration and the Republican Party can be mounted. Right now, frankly, the Democratic Party's prospects in 2004 don't look particularly good, although

the failing economy and post-Iraq War complications could still reverse that, and signs of a backlash against the Bush administration are beginning to appear. The recent appointment of Shamina Singh by House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi as an official envoy to the Asian and Pacific Islander American communities and as a liaison to the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus and the India Caucus is an encouraging sign for the Party and for the community. This is the first time a leadership office in the United States Congress "has placed such a high priority on issues facing Asian and Pacific Islander Americans,"<sup>16</sup> said Singh, a veteran of the Clinton administration.

If the Democrats lose in 2004, perhaps some bright, articulate, passionate, and idealistic South Asian American will emerge from the political trenches to rally the party to a return to power. After all, the Democrats produced a Catholic president in 1960, a woman vice presidential candidate in 1984, a Jewish vice presidential candidate in 2000, so, why not a South Asian candidate in 2008? But, at this point, it seems just as likely that this candidate will be a Republican.



1. The best data on voting and affiliation along party lines pertains to the broader category of Asian Americans, a group still strongly supportive of the Democratic Party. How this data breaks down specifically among South Asians and between different South Asian groups is not available to my knowledge.
2. Despite inquiries with South Asian and Indian American political organizations and with opinion leaders and journalists, I have neither been able to

- obtain any hard data on specific numbers of South Asian-registered Democrats or Republicans nor on voting patterns along party lines. It would seem that the time is ripe to do some basic polling to determine what the numbers actually are, and I would recommend that politically motivated groups in the South Asian American community undertake this.
3. New York: Plume, 2001.
  4. I base this on first-hand interviews with working-class Pakistani-origin youth in Queens, New York. See also the poignant article about an 18-year-old kid the INS wants to deport: "All-American? U.S. Says No," Corey Kilgannon, *New York Times*, April 19, 2003.
  5. Alexandra Starr, "Can Bush Cement His Inroads Among Jewish Voters?" *BusinessWeek Online*, May 5, 2003, [http://www.businessweek.com/print/premium/content/03\\_18/c3831061\\_mz013.htm?mz](http://www.businessweek.com/print/premium/content/03_18/c3831061_mz013.htm?mz)
  6. See, for example, the profile on NPR's All Things Considered: "Pro-Israel Stance Helping to Link American Jews, The Republican Party and Conservative Christians Politically," May 16, 2002. Available at [www.npr.org/porgrams/atc/transcripts/2002/020516.liasson.html](http://www.npr.org/porgrams/atc/transcripts/2002/020516.liasson.html). See also Michael Lind's detailed analysis of the devotion of neo-conservatives within the Bush administration to right-wing Israeli causes in, *Made in Texas: George W. Bush and the Southern Takeover of American Politics* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), especially the chapter "Armageddon," p. 128-59.
  7. [www.cvhts.org](http://www.cvhts.org)
  8. See Robert M. Hathaway, "Charity or Terrorism?" *The Hindu*, August 8, 2002. The article is available at [http://wwics.si.edu/index.cfm?fuseaction=news.item&news\\_id=10361](http://wwics.si.edu/index.cfm?fuseaction=news.item&news_id=10361)
  9. See, "The Foreign Exchange of Hate: IDRF and the American Funding of Hindutva, Mumbai: Sabrang Communications Private Limited and France," *The South Asia Citizens Web*, 2002.
  10. K.P. Nayar, "India Blacklist Bid Fails," *Telegraph* (Kolkata), March 8, 2003.
  11. Shakti Bhatt, "Marine Reserve Nishkam Gupta, 21, to Fight for 'Hindu Cause,'" [rediff.com](http://rediff.com), April 4, 2003.
  12. Ibid.
  13. "Hundreds Stage Pro-War Rally in Western Indian State," *AFP*, <http://au.news.yahoo.com/o30409/19/jj8q.html>
  14. Interview on April 21, 2003. Mr. Patel was extremely generous with his time, and I wish to thank him for his gracious response to my many questions.
  15. E-mail message, April 10, 2003.
  16. Vasantha Arora, "Indian American in Key Leadership Position," *Indo-Asian News Service*, Yahoo! India News, April 25, 2003. <http://in.news.yahoo.com/030425/23/ssr.html>