

Lights, camera, action

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WHEN I was growing up in Los Angeles in the 1960s, the first question anyone asked me when I said my dad was ‘Indian’ was ‘Oh yeah? What tribe?’ My sister Devyani, whom we all called ‘Devi’, was teased regularly on the school playground with the taunt: ‘Davy Crockett, queen of the wild frontier!’ It seemed the only way we children could be understood by white Americans was within the context of cowboys (or cowgirls) and Indians. To be an Indian from India was something so entirely outside the normal frame of most people’s reference as to be, literally, unimaginable. Our father’s exotic looks were automatically identified as Mexican, and people were shocked, even offended, that he did not speak Spanish.

India did not figure at all on the map of American identity in those days. When forced to consider India as our place of origin, the most people could conjure were stock images of British Raj exotica: snake charmers, carapasoned elephants, tigers stretched out below the booted and jodhpured legs of a triumphant topihatted colonial administrator. Add to that a full-frontal shot of the Taj Mahal and physically repulsive images of starving people living in filth, and that was about as far as most Americans could, or would, go. ‘You’ve been there? Oh, I would never go to India. I couldn’t stand to see all that poverty.’

I remember feeling somewhat ‘dirtied’ in some way by these comments, as if the simple fact of having visited a country where the poor were allowed to exist alongside the not poor (which was generally not the case in America) caused one to become permanently sullied in some way. Our clean white American friends wanted to preserve their purity by protecting themselves from contaminating images such as those of India’s starving millions, images they had been unlucky enough to glimpse from time to time on the evening television news. For us, there was no escaping India. After all, we’d not only seen India, we were Indian. The food we ate at home was enough alone to confirm how different we were from our American neighbours. Our unpronounceable names, my father’s accent, the relatives in saris and safari suits we seemed always to be sponsoring: we didn’t have to go to India. In our home, India came to us.

There had always been the odd Indian (of the subcontinental variety) in the United States going back to the days of the Yankee clipper ships in the 18th century. A number of Sikhs made their way to the West Coast, settling in California and Washington states, around the turn of the last century. Some, such as those unlucky enough to try their luck working in the logging

industry in Bellingham, Washington were literally run out of the country (to Canada) by white Americans who felt the Punjabis were there to steal their jobs. Those who chose Yuba City and California's Central Valley were luckier, but many of them lost their land to 'alien land exclusion' acts in the 1920s.

The fear of hordes of non-white immigrants sweeping in from Asia, raping white women and stealing jobs and land away from fine, hardworking European-origin Americans and in the process monstrously transforming the United States into something alien from its mythic Anglo beginnings was a very real part of the American psyche throughout the 20th century. Only the 'brain-drain' requirements of the Cold War finally cracked immigration laws specifically designed to preserve the white character of the nation from the dreaded 'yellow (or brown or black or red) peril'.

These laws were so effective that when my father arrived in the United States in 1947, there were only 10,000 persons of Indian origin in the country. He had to travel from Boston all the way to Oklahoma just to find one other Indian he knew in the vast United States. Today, American residents and citizens of Indian origin number close to two million, and their numbers continue to grow. The first wave, following the liberalization of immigration laws in the late 1960s, was composed primarily of highly skilled professionals: doctors, engineers, scientists. These immigrants were generally successful, put a great store on education, and spawned high-achieving offspring who with, stereo-typical regularity – out-stereotyped only by the Chinese kids (sometimes) – won spelling bees, became Valedictorians, Salutatorians, and otherwise graduated cum laude and went on to Harvard, MIT, Stanford and the Wharton School. They all then got jobs as physicians or investment bankers.

The first big wave was followed by different successive waves as US immigration law evolved. During the 1970s and especially the 1980s, more and more non-professionals began immigrating to the United States from India. Certain entrepreneurial niches became, if not dominated by Indian immigrants, at least highly associated with them: motels, newspaper stands, convenience stores. All America knows the character 'Apu' on the popular animated television show *The Simpsons* (though his last name 'Nahasapeemapetilon' is probably known only to the show's junkies). Apu is probably the most famous Indian convenience store owner in the United States. The 'Patel motel' is an expression every Indian immigrant is familiar with, if not every native-born American. The image of the Indian-run gas station is so familiar that the junior senator

from New York, Hilary Clinton, recently got in a whole lot of *desi* trouble when she attempted a poor joke about a gas station owner named Mahatma Gandhi.

Then came the tech boom.. Silicon Valley's need for more and more workers skilled in information technology led in the 1990s to as many as half the H1B visas for highly skilled workers being given to Indians coming to the United States. The industry couldn't get enough of India's IIT graduates. So many came from IIT campuses in South India alone that many international Indians now swear the best South Indian food in the world is available in California. Some of these whiz-kids learned the American success story so well, it took them no time at all to get a hold of some venture capital, start up their own companies and become, in more than a few cases, international market leaders. The IIT techie immigrant spawned his own pop-culture character in the form of nerdie tech intern Asok in the popular cartoon strip *Dilbert*. Millions of Americans follow the antics of Asok, a young man so brainy he can heat up his tea merely by holding the mug to his forehead and thinking, in their Sunday paper's comic section.

When it began to be difficult to bring smart, highly trained and relatively cheap infotech workers to the United States on a reduced number of H1B visas, some of these market leaders decided to take advantage of new communications technologies and take the jobs to workers in India. The idea caught on like wildfire, capturing not only the imagination of Indian entrepreneurs looking for a hot ticket back to the motherland but also that of every US company looking to save a little money on back-office processes and services ranging from call centres to data processing to financial market analysis.

How could I have ever imagined as a child that what I so longed for in those days – for Americans to notice India, to talk about India, to see that India existed – would be achieved in the 2004 election year by outsourcing? How could I have foreseen that the T-Shirts that said 'My parents went to Disneyland and all I got was this lousy T-Shirt' would be replaced some day by ones lamenting 'My job went to India and all I got was this lousy T-Shirt?' Suddenly, the tide of the Yellow Peril was reversed: instead of Asian workers pouring into the United States to work for slave wages (in their own country they had it even worse and they were used to sleeping ten to a bed anyway), now it looked like that 'giant sucking sound' that used to come from down Mexico way had been amplified about a thousand times and was coming from, of all places, India. What was the world coming to?

Outsourcing put India on the covers of *BusinessWeek* and *Wired* magazines. Outsourcing put India on the evening news every night. Outsourcing has become one of the hottest issues in a down-and-dirty presidential race, even threatening to eclipse gay marriage. When good American jobs, jobs for educated people, start leaving for India, what can the nation be coming to? As if we didn't have enough problem with terrorists from 'over there'. They want to kill us and if they can't kill us by exploding a dirty bomb at rush hour in Grand Central Station, they'll content themselves with taking our jobs.

Tom Friedman, ever the champion of globalization as a force for nothing but good in this world, begged readers of *The New York Times* in one of his recent columns on India to consider that unemployed white-collar workers in America were a small price to pay if their jobs could provide young people in countries like India something better to do with their time than grow frustrated with the West's wealth and freedom and commit terrorist acts against the United States. ('Help fight the war on terror: become unemployed.') As if young people in India (and not, for example, in that old Bush family-friendly nation Saudi Arabia – hello!) represented that kind of threat. Amid all the election-year hysteria, the simple fact that the number of jobs outsourced to India represents a tiny fraction of the three million or so American jobs lost since George W. Bush became president is bound to remain elusive.

Fortunately for me, an Indian-American whose father was, yes, an engineer (a classic brain-drain case who worked on nothing less than the ultimate Cold War project: the Apollo missions), there are other forces at work shaping America's image of India, namely Indian-Americans. Call them NRIs, PIOs, next gen OBIs or whatever acronym you can think of, Americans of Indian origin are making the American scene. There was already the international diaspora jet set, mostly concentrated in New York – the Deepak Chopras, the Ismail Merchants, the newly New Yorkized-formerly-from-London Salman Rushdies. These are members of the Indian diaspora uber-class who remain, in the popular American imagination, atomized denizens of that rarified world known as 'celebrities'.

Recently, however, it has begun to be possible to see Americans of Indian origin on a daily basis on television. These people sound like Main Street and dress like Wall Street (or Miami Beach, or Beverly Hills, or Ralph Lauren) even if they look slightly darker and more exotic than, say, the *Today Show's* Katie Couric. Take CNN doctor-cum-reporter Sanjay Gupta, from whom millions of Americans get their news about the medical

fate of our boys in Iraq. Sanjay Gupta, described by *India Today* as ‘medical correspondent, war reporter and sex symbol at large’ is a name and a face appearing in living rooms (and perhaps even bedrooms) across the United States every day.

Sanjay Gupta is the television version of what has become a familiar fixture in many American lives: the South Asian doctor. Add the doctor to the convenience store owner from whom Americans buy their daily paper and soda, the gas station owner from whom they fill up their tank, the array of Indian frozen entrees in the frozen-food section of any major supermarket, the Indian restaurant at the local strip mall, and the Indian in a call centre in Bangalore who just helped them obtain a Citicard credit increase, and India begins to feel to Americans less like Timbuktu and more like, say, Ireland (well, maybe not quite yet).

RReal-life films such as *Monsoon Wedding* and *Bend it Like Beckham* have been extraordinarily successful not only because each was, in its own right, simply a great film, but also because the Indians portrayed in these films are so much like, well, everyone else. These movies, both made by Indian diaspora women directors, depict Indians at home in the globalized world, whether it’s the trials and tribulations of a young woman negotiating conflicting expectations between her Indian immigrant home and her British teen environment in *Bend it Like Beckham* or a young woman juggling the conflicting expectations of patriarchal family values under siege, an American *desi* husband-to-be and her own desires in *Monsoon Wedding*. Diaspora locations from the UK to America feel increasingly like home to immigrants from India and are taken for granted as such by their children. This is true not only in the Indian ghettos of Edison, New Jersey, Jackson Heights, Queens or Devon Street in Chicago but in small towns, suburban housing tracts and urban high-rises across the country.

MMost importantly, America feels like home where America really, on some level, exists: in the imagination. What America is and what it is to be an American is an ever-evolving concept, continuously reinvented by the current crop of immigrants. When my father arrived in the United States in 1947, pizza was an exotic dish most Americans had never tasted. When one considers that now you can get a ‘dosa wrap’ in any number of American cities, not to mention the ubiquitous presence of the Punjabi food most of the world knows as Indian cuisine, the measure of how Indianized America has become begins to be felt.

The stories of immigrants to the United States from India are being added to preceding layers of immigrant stories, becoming so integrated into the larger American narrative that Jhumpa Lahiri's short-story collection *The Interpreter of Maladies* could win a Pulitzer prize for 'distinguished fiction by an American author, preferably dealing with American life.'

Indeed, America has become so South Asianized that *Newsweek* recently ran a cluster of articles under the rubric 'American Masala', declaring in the subtitle of the influence of subcontinentals on the superpower: 'They've changed the way we eat, dress, work and play.' Most Americans take the presence of *chai* on the menu at Starbucks for granted (if in versions as alien to the Indian original as a vanilla-flavoured and iced). Many are becoming comfortable with Indian music, whether of the 'Asian dub' variety, remixed with hip-hop or listened to straight. 'Basement Bhangra' at SOB's in New York, presided over by disc-jockey queen DJ Rekha, just named the 'best DJ in New York' by *Time Out New York* magazine, has been dubbed 'the best party in NYC' by *New York* magazine. The latest fitness craze in California is the 'Masala Bhangra Workout'. Hindi film songs have begun to appear in the most unlikely venues, from the popular television series *The Sopranos* to Lata Mangeshkar singing on the soundtrack of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, starring Jim Carrey and Kate Winslet.

Indian-origin director M. Night Shyamalan hit the Hollywood big time with his blockbuster *The Sixth Sense*, followed by the successful *Signs*, which featured 'documentary' footage of the film's nasty alien invaders igniting mass terror in India. Bollywood director Shekhar Kapur struck Hollywood gold and garnered kudos for his movie *Elizabeth*, a breakthrough film for actress Cate Blanchett. Meanwhile, Bollywood has begun to break into American mainstream theatres with films such as *Lagaan*.

Diaspora actors are going mainstream as well. Actress Parminder Nagra has been able to parley her success in Bend It Like Beckham into a major role in one of America's most popular television dramas, *ER*. She's been a smashing success. Soon, American television audiences may be treated to the first Indian-American television sitcom. Casting calls have gone out to the community for an NBC comedy pilot called *Nevermind Nirvana*. According to the press release from NBC Studios in Los Angeles, actors are being solicited for five roles: Sunil 'Sonny' Mehta, a soon-to-be medical graduate suffering from doubts about his professional choice, his younger brother Raju, only too happy to see his brother experiencing existential angst, father Arjun, a successful doctor described in the casting call as no less than 'an

East Indian Walter Matthau' (really, I'm not making this up), mother Sarita, also a doctor, and a family servant Govind (non-speaking role).

The reality of the Indian diaspora community is far more diverse than the successful Gujarati doctor model depicted in *Nevermind Nirvana*. (I write this despite having close family who rather perfectly fit this stereotype.) Within the community, there are deep divisions of class, length of time 'off the boat', religion, ethnicity, caste and political orientation. Though, as a group, Indian Americans are a 'model minority' with annual earnings averaging \$60,000 per year – far above the general American average – a growing percentage of Indian immigrants do not have advanced degrees, do not speak English well, and live below the poverty line. Many highly educated Indians who arrive in the United States on, say, an H1B visa, are surprised by how communally segregated even the educated upwardly mobile Indian-American community is compared with the urban Indian community. It is often the case in America that Telugu-speakers don't 'mix' with Punjabis don't mix with Gujaratis don't mix with Bengalis, let alone Hindus mixing with Muslims.

The Indian-American Hindu community is also highly 'saffronized' boasting large support, both in numbers and in dollars, for *Hindutva* causes. The VHPA (Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America), the Overseas Friends of the BJP, and Hindu Unity are powerful groups whose mission is to propagate the idea among identity-insecure Indian immigrants and their vulnerable offspring that Indian=Hindu=supporter of hindutva. The summer camps run by the VHPA have been able to successfully indoctrinate many unsuspecting second-generation Indian Americans so that they emerge into young adulthood with a very narrow definition of what it is to be an Indian. A young man from Kerala, a Syrian Christian, recounted to me that when he went to a meeting of the popular South Asian students club at New York University, he was shunned by many of the students who, zealous in the purity of their 'Indian-ness', told him: 'How can you be Indian with a name like "Abraham"? That's not an Indian name.'

The tales are endless of the OBI young woman who can decently perform Bharatnatyam, sings a little Carnatic music, possesses a stunning wardrobe of expensive *saris* and *salwar kameez*, trusts her parents to find her a rich husband and who, by all these indices, considers herself to be truly and deeply Indian only to visit India for the first time in her life and discover, to her horror, that her *pukka desi* cousins in Delhi or Mumbai are

wearing Armani Xchange, spending every night out clubbing, dating like crazy, couldn't figure out how to properly drape a sari if their life depended on it, and would rather die than be caught performing in a college-student *bhangra* production sporting garishly coloured matching *chunia choli*.

At the same time, the Indian diaspora in America boasts strong, politically progressive groups supporting everything from gay rights to anti-globalization to a pan South Asian-American identity that trumps divisions not only among Indians but between Indians and their fellow subcontinentals. The confrontations between SALGA, South Asian Lesbian and Gay Association, and the annual organizers of the India Day parade in New York are legendary. Trikone is an activist group based in San Francisco for Gay, Lesbian and (according to their website) Trisexual South Asians. Active women's groups are addressing the problem of domestic violence in the South Asian community: Sakhi in New York, Maitri in San Francisco, Sawera in Portland, Oregon, to name a few. Berkeley, California-based EKTA provides a highly visible progressive South Asian network through its outspoken condemnation of the Gujarat massacres in 2002, its current 'Travelling Film South Asia' tour, and its participation in the annual Bay Area Progressive South Asians Conference.

The struggle for who gets to define the community is far from over. In this presidential election year, Indian-American political clout is being felt as never before. One simple factor is the increase in the Indian-origin population.. Another factor is a new willingness by Indian Americans to get involved in the American political process. From municipal councils, to governorships and congressional races, all the way up to key positions in the current, and certainly in future, administrations, Indian American's are increasingly visible in the American political process.

Perhaps the most potent sign of Indian-American political clout is the emergence of powerful political action groups in Washington. USINPAC (United States India Political Action Committee), only founded in the Fall of 2002, already counts more than 27,000 members. IALIPAC (Indian American Leadership Initiative Political Action Committee) is another influential group. There is the IARC (Indian American Republican Committee) and NAIRA (National Asian Indian Republican Association).

I recently received an email from a prominent Indian-American businessman drumming up support for South Asians for Kerry for President. Long wooed by Democrats and Republicans alike for their individual deep pockets, Indian

Americans have, only in the last couple of years, transformed themselves from a loose assortment of successful individuals into organized, focused political forces to be reckoned with. There is no doubt that groups such as USINPAC will play an increasingly powerful role in US domestic and international policy, no matter which party is in the White House or who controls the Senate and the House.

The relationship between India and the Indian diaspora in America is an evolving family saga, with every stock character from every known epic represented. In this respect, it is not unlike a Hindi movie, filled with heroes and villains, prodigal sons and daughters, long-suffering mothers, misperceptions that cause the characters to act in ways opposite to their interests, love traps and triangles. The desire of the Indian diaspora for India is mirrored by the desire of India for its diaspora population.

In the recent film *Kal Ho Na Ho*, we learn that to succeed in America, you have to get in touch with your Indian roots: the heroine's family's restaurant business, Café New York, is doomed until they change 'York' to 'Delhi', replace the American flag in the window with an Indian flag, and start serving up some good Indian *khana*. American customers pour in. What's more, the Indians take all the customers away from the Chinese restaurant across the street. An even better medium for capturing the India-diaspora relationship may be the television soap opera, not so much the planned American serial Nevermind Nirvana as the current Indian hit *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi*. Tune in for the next installment.