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Political Participation of the Indian Diaspora in the USA

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Abstract

This essay aims to foreground the types and patterns of political participation of Asian Indians in the US and the change and continuity thereof since migration of the community began in significant numbers in the 20th century. It shows how immigration reforms and citizenship laws prevented the community, for over half a century (until at least 1965), from achieving a demographic critical mass, which is a crucial factor in becoming an effective player in the political system of the US, and the community's reaction to these restrictions. Surveying the political participation of Indian Americans since the years prior to India's independence in 1947, the essay illustrates how the community could be an example of transnational activism and long distance nationalism even before these terms became fashionable in academia. In the light of various activities of Indian American organizations, including fund-raising for some of the past elections and the creation of congressional caucuses, the essay examines how a diasporic ethnic community sought to make its voice heard in electoral politics in spite of being numerically insignificant, accounting for 2.8 million in the 2010 census, which is only 0.9% of the total population. The community's efforts at lobbying US Congress are seen in the context of diasporic mediations in international relations, a subject increasingly attracting scholarly attention. The essay concludes with an assessment of the political activism of the Indian community.

Introduction

From the trials and tribulations of the pioneering Indians from the Punjab region, who traveled to the West Coast of the US in the late 19th to early 20th century, to the mobilizing of funds and votes to support candidates in the US presidential polls and attempts to influence congressional legislation, the Asian Indian community in the US has tried political participation with different levels of success. The socio-political situation in the US that influenced patterns of activism of Indian immigrants in the US may be broadly classified as (1) immigration reforms in the host land, which in turn acted as a critical component in achieving the required numerical strength for the community, which impinges upon its ability to organize, (2) reactions to politics in homeland, which, in the case of Asian Indians in the US, goes back to pre-independence years, (3) participation in host country electoral politics, and (4) attempts to influence the bilateral relationship between host country and homeland, which also includes reactions to regional politics in South Asia.

Indian Americans, US Exclusionary Laws and Immigration Reforms

Early 20th Century

In the initial years of their migration, Indians in the US were often the targets of racially motivated campaigns: students were hazed in universities,¹ while bunkhouses of Indian workers were attacked by white laborers. Protests against “Hindus” buying land for farming coincided with campaigns opposed to Asiatic immigration that described the Asians as the “Yellow Peril” and Indians as a “Tide of Turbans.” Political parties and exclusivist organizations, along with a section of the media, seem to have fanned the fires of this hatred. Indians were described as people willing to take up jobs for cheap wages, thus taking away the work of local labor. Whites in Marysville, California drove out Indians from Live Oak. A mob attacked houses occupied by 70 Hindus who had been discharged from the Southern Pacific Transportation Company.² In Bellingham, Washington, violent white mobs expelled Sikhs in September 1907. The Asiatic Exclusion League, which emerged as the most significant organization aimed at preventing and opposing the entry of Asians into the US, directed some of its attacks at Indians.³

With strong lobbies working against Asian immigration,⁴ it was only a matter of time before the Indians were also included as targets of exclusionary laws. The residents of Yuba City opposed Hindus buying property but found it difficult to stop them, as they were British subjects at that time.⁵ In 1913, California passed the first Alien Land Law, primarily aimed at Chinese and Japanese migrants, who were arriving to the state in large numbers at that time. The law provided, inter alia, that “aliens not eligible for citizenship and corporations in which the majority of the stock was owned by ineligible aliens had to comply with the land ownership provisions of any treaty existing between the countries involved” (Okutsu, 1995, p. 16). California enacted another Alien Land Law in 1920, prohibiting the transfer of land to non-citizens by sale or lease. Aliens who were not eligible for citizenship could not hold land in guardianship for their children, who were citizens. If it was determined that land was purchased in one person's name with money from an Asian alien, the land would automatically become state property.

Indians had tried to circumvent earlier land laws, buying property in other peoples' names or in the name of their sons and daughters who were born in the US and, thus, were eligible for citizenship. It was even alleged that Indians married to secure land and that they used their wives and children to lease and own land for them. This trend was curbed by the 1920 law, after which many Indians began leasing out land through verbal agreements. The 1920 Alien Land Law was applied more stringently to

Indians after the 1923 Thind citizenship case, discussed below. Prohibition on Asian land leasing and ownership became effective in 1924 (Leonard, 1982, p. 70). The issue took an ugly turn with the dramatic twin murders committed by lettuce farmer Pahkar Singh, which illustrated the difficulties this law posed for Punjabi and other Asian farmers (Leonard, 1984, pp. 76-88). Another case involved the convicting and imprisonment of Labh Singh and 65 other Indians in 1933 of conspiracy to evade the Alien Land laws (Leonard, 1982, p. 70).

The ability of Indians to migrate in significant numbers was hampered by a number of reforms aimed at preventing or controlling Asian migration to the US. The 1917 Asian Barred Zone and Literacy Test, generally referred to as the Asian Exclusion Act, delineated specific geographic zones from which people should not be admitted to the US. The legislation essentially extended the Chinese Exclusion Act to other Asians, except for citizens of the Philippines and Guam. The act imposed a literacy test on immigrants, which stipulated that only those who could already read and write English would be admitted to America. The Immigration Act of 1924, also known as the National Origins Act, put further restrictions on Indian immigration. It limited the number of immigrants who could be admitted from any country to 2% of the number of people from that country who were already living in the US as of 1890 (per the census of 1890). Although India technically had a quota of 100 immigrants as per this law, this quota was used up by British and other Europeans residing in India to immigrate to the US (Hess, 1982, p. 31). The law, in effect, ended up further restricting Indian migration. A National Origins Formula on US immigration was established in 1929, which excluded Asians. The total annual immigration was capped at 150,000. Between 1931 and 1945, only 841 Indians immigrated legally to the US, while many entered illegally (McMahon, 2002, p. 16).⁶

Post World War II Period

The immigration reforms in the post-World War II period reflected a changed international scenario and heralded the easing of restrictions for Asian, and by extension Indian, migration to the US. A main contributor to the easing of restrictions for Chinese migration was China's support of the US in the fight against Japan during World War II, while the imminent independence of India also made it possible to enact more liberal legislation, allowing the admission of greater numbers of Indians. Indians had also helped the US war effort, and many congressmen called for a treatment similar to the revised Chinese migration laws for the migration of Indians in the 1946 Luce-Cellar Act.⁷ Passage of the Luce-Cellar Bill, which specified the number of immigrants that the US could accept per year from specific countries, led to arrival of "quota immigrants." The bill amended naturalization law, permitting persons born in India or of Indian ancestry to become American citizens. India was removed from the "Barred Zone," created in 1917. The annual number of immigrants was fixed at 100 each for India and Pakistan. Between 1946 and 1953, that total number was reached only once. The 1950 census showed that there were 2,650 Indians in the US at that time (Jacoby, 1956). The Luce-Cellar Act included Indians for the first time in an immigration act as a specific category.⁸ The act specifically authorized "the admission into the US of persons of races indigenous to India" and the Philippines and to make them eligible for naturalization. As a result, between 1948 and 1965, some 1,772 Indians acquired US citizenship (Hess, 1982, p. 32). The subsequent Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 abolished racial restrictions but retained the quota system and the policy of restricting the numbers of immigrants from certain countries. It established a preference system and placed great importance on labor qualifications. This act was passed despite a veto by President Harry Truman, who described it as "un-American."⁹

The 1965 Immigration Reforms

The historic Immigration and Nationality Services (INS) Act of 1965 overturned many provisions of the earlier 1952 Immigration and Nationality Act and eventually facilitated the massive immigration of Indian professionals, who later became the bedrock of Indian American influence and political clout in the country. The 1965 act discontinued quotas based on national origin and gave preference to those who already had relatives in America. An annual limitation of 170,000 visas was established for immigrants from Eastern Hemisphere countries, with no more than 20,000 per country. The ending of the national origins quotas from Asia with the 1965 law, along with the concurrent rapid population growth and lack of economic development in Latin America, led to an unprecedented mass entry of people to the US from regions that were formerly subject to quotas, including India. This at last reversed the policy of severely restricting immigration from Asia, a trend that had remained unchanged since the founding of the US. The INS Act revived Indian communities scattered across the US, mainly on its eastern and western coasts, that had nearly died out as a result of various Asian Exclusion legislations. The 1965 law's emphasis on family reunification ensured that those who had arrived years earlier could bring in their wives and other relatives.¹⁰ By the first decade of 21st century, the Indian population had grown to over 2.8 million.

Restrictions in Citizenship

The ability of immigrant communities to participate meaningfully in the political process of receiving countries is largely determined by the citizenship laws of those countries. Indian community members famously fought to get their citizenship or naturalization, and, often, the results of such struggles were not positive. Though Indians were the only exceptions among Asians to receive favorable verdicts on citizenship eligibility from US courts on the assumption that they belonged to the "Mediterranean branch of the Caucasian family" (Chandrasekhar, 1982, p. 19), judges often issued verdicts arbitrarily. Between 1908 and 1923, 67 Indians acquired citizenship through court procedures in 17 different cases (Chandrasekhar, 1982, p. 19). A court in California's Imperial County ruled on October 16, 1915 that 5,000 Hindus in California and many other Pacific Coast states were eligible for American citizenship,¹¹ maintaining that a "Hindu of the better class, who can prove that he is a member of the Aryan race," was eligible for citizenship. A large number of Indians sought citizenship, but only 75 to 80 of them succeeded, as the government subsequently successfully sued for the cancellation of most of the citizenships already awarded.

Opposition to citizenship for Indians got a boost after the Supreme Court's 1922 verdict that Takao Ozawa, a Japanese man, was ineligible for citizenship, as the term "white persons" was declared synonymous with Caucasians (Hess, 1982, p. 30; Hing, 1993, pp. 226-229). Initially, Indians rejoiced at the verdict, as they were considered to be a variant of Caucasians. Their hopes were dashed, however, when Bhagat Singh Thind, a former soldier and scholar who fought for the US in World War I, applied for citizenship. Dismissing Thind's contention that he was eligible for citizenship as he belonged to the Aryan race, Supreme Court Justice George Sutherland ruled that East Indian immigrants were "aliens ineligible to citizenship." Many US newspapers hailed the verdict, saying, for example, that "this is surely an instance in which a court has decided on facts and not on inferences."¹² The Thind decision was applied with retrospective effect, and Indians who had previously been naturalized were asked to surrender their American citizenship. Between 1923 and 1926, the naturalization of some 50 Indians was cancelled. The courts consistently upheld the government's claim that naturalization certificates had been illegally procured (Hess, 1982, p. 31). Indians fought strongly for citizenship and managed to get some American opinion leaders to speak their case, until a new law finally changed their fortunes in terms of becoming eligible to be considered worthy of such inclusion. The Nationality Act of 1940 said the right to become naturalized shall extend, among others,

to “persons of races indigenous to India.”¹³ In the Luce-Cellar Act of 1946, which amended the 1940 bill further, the right to become naturalized citizens was extended to Filipinos and Asian Indians.¹⁴ Thus, as noted by La Brack, for over a quarter of a century, Indians’ legal rights—and, by extension, their ability to take part in US political processes—were dictated by US immigration policy. It would be difficult to find any important area of the lives of Indians that was not touched upon as a result of changes in immigration laws. Marriage, family, ownership of land, voting rights, political freedom, free entry and exit of the country, and citizenship were all affected by political tensions and decisions made on racial and social grounds (La Brack, 1982, p. 59).

Reactions to Homeland Politics

As noted by Kurien, scholars have considered diasporic politics to be a response to the social, cultural, and economic marginalization experienced by immigrants. Participation in ethnic nationalism brings recognition and status from compatriots both in the host land and at home, compensating for the marginality and loss of social status experienced in host society (Kurien, 2005, p. 160). In the case of Indians in the US, it may be argued that a combination of racial hatred, exclusion policies, discriminatory laws, religious and cultural isolation, and immigration restrictions, at least until 1965, may have contributed to the nationalist sentiment among Indians in the US, which was largely inspired by the independence struggle in their homeland.¹⁵ The initial years of Indian migration to the US coincided with the struggle against British imperialism in India. Many of the immigrants had reached the US fleeing appalling poverty in India under the British Empire. The organizing efforts of Indian immigrants in the US were a reaction to the day-to-day problems in the host country as well as a wish to bring freedom to their compatriots in their homeland, to which they hoped to return. In a way, their still meager living conditions in the host land had only reinvigorated their desire for India’s freedom, as they felt that independence of their motherland would bring them respect and equal treatment in the US. Indian immigrants kept a close watch on events at home vis-à-vis the freedom movement. The stage was set for a transnational political movement, perhaps one of the early examples of long-distance nationalism.

The “Komagata Maru incident,” in which hundreds of Indians were denied entry into Canada due to Canadian immigration restrictions on Asians, may have contributed to the anger and organizing vigor of the Indian nationalists in the US.¹⁶ The Canadian government, in 1909, sought to end Asian migration with the “continuous voyage” requirement (Hess, 1982, p. 29), which stipulated that a migrant would be admitted to the country only if he or she had come through a continuous or unbroken journey, a difficult feat to achieve in those days. In 1914, Gurdit Singh, a Punjabi businessman, organized the “continuous” journey of Komagata Maru, a Japanese steam liner, with 376 passengers on board: 340 Sikhs, 24 Muslims, and 12 Hindus. On May 23, 1914, the Komagata Maru arrived in Vancouver, British Columbia, but those on board were not allowed to alight, and the ship was kept on dock until July 23, 1914. The Indians, nearly all veterans of British Army’s Sikh Regiments, fought for their right to settle in Canada (Gardner, 1958, pp. 61-67) by virtue of being subjects of the British Empire. Three riots occurred, and half the Canadian Navy was called to quell the tensions.¹⁷ The vessel was forced to depart from Vancouver and return to India. Upon re-entry into Calcutta, a gunboat forced the ship to stop, and the passengers were taken prisoner. In subsequent clashes and police firing that became known as the Budge Budge Riot, at least 20 people were killed.

The Komagata Maru incident led to a sense of indignation among Indians in Canada and the US. Within a few years, a radical political movement known as “Gadar” gained ground in the US.

Aimed at promoting the revolutionary overthrow of British rule in India, Gadar originally cut across religious lines and for some time gathered virtually all caste Indians into a common political group.¹⁸ After preliminary conferences among Indian immigrants in the states of Oregon and Washington, a Gadar movement was organized in California in November 1913.¹⁹ Its leaders were aware of the international tensions of those days and were quick to recognize that Germany was a power likely to be friendly to Indian freedom fighters' nationalist cause. At a Gadar-sponsored rally in Sacramento, on December 31, 1913, the San Francisco German Consul General was a special guest (Brown, 1982, p. 43). During World War I, the Gadar party got sucked into the vortex of global conflict. In 1915, five boats loaded with weapons and propaganda set sail from various parts of California, financed by the German war effort, in a failed sabotage attempt. Many people were arrested and 18 hanged. Many "Gadarites" were put on trial in what became known as the Hindu German Conspiracy trial and were deported for violating neutrality laws in US that prohibited any anti-British activities in American soil (Juergensmeyer, 1982, p. 48).

Besides Gadar, from time to time, special interest organizations came into existence. The Hindustanis' Welfare and Reform Society of America was established in 1920 "to promote goodwill and fellow-feeling among the Hindustanees in their country [of residence] and abroad and to create a good understanding and establish good relations between the Hindustanees and Americans" among other things (HWRSA, 1920). The Sikhs, having been at the receiving end of hostility partly due to their distinguishable appearance, had understood the need for organizing at an early stage of Indian immigration to US. The Pacific Coast Khalsa Divan Society was incorporated in 1915 "to foster the spirit of fellowship and brotherhood amongst followers of Sikh religion, and to create a spirit of goodwill." The India Home Rule League of America held fundraising for activities related to India's freedom struggle (IHRL, 1918, p. 6). Other organizations active in those years include the Hindustan Association of America, the India Society of Yuba and Sutter counties, and the All India Brotherhood, based in Detroit. The India Association of America was led by Dalip Singh Saund, while Mubarak Ali Khan was the leader of India Welfare League, and Sardar Jagjit Singh headed India League of America.

Formation of organizations continued after India's independence, too, though the focus of organizations then changed to striving for inclusion in the host land, catalyzing cohesion and unity within the community, and trying to influence the political process in the US. The interactions among many of the organizations mirrored the rivalries between India and Pakistan in the South Asian sub-continent. For instance, the India League of America was formed in 1972 as a response to the Pakistan League of America, established a year earlier. The Association of Indians in America, established in 1967, successfully campaigned for a separate classification of Indians in the US census after 1980, while Pakistanis continued to be classified under the "Other" section of the larger Asian category (Mohammad-Arif, 2000, pp. 4-5). Creating awareness about political participation in the US was part of the mandate of some of these organizations. The Indian American Forum for Political Education, the Indo-US political Action Committee (both formed in 1987), the Indian American Friendship Council, the India Abroad Center for Political Awareness, and the Asian American Hotel Owners Association could be included among such organizations, which fine-tuned their skills in bargaining with the local politicians (Mohammad-Arif, 2000). Umbrella organizations such as the Federation of Indian American Associations and the National Association of Americans of Asian Indian Descent were formed partly as a result of the complaints about disunity among various community associations. Some of these organizations came to the fore with specific campaigns on issues of concern either to India or to the Indian American community. For example, the National Federation of Indian American Associations (NFIAA) and the American Association of Physicians of Indian origin campaigned in

1985 against moves to cut Medicare funding to hospitals employing doctors with foreign medical degrees (Mishra & Mohapatra, 2002, pp. 5-7). In 1987, NFIAA persuaded the US Congress to withdraw the sale of Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) aircraft to Pakistan (Mishra & Mohapatra, 2002, p. 6).

While reacting to homeland politics, many of these organizations fell prey to the communalization of politics in India, which spread to the second and third generation Indian Americans. This trickling down of conflict from the homeland to the community in the host land may have had its roots in the cultural and social isolation that the community felt in the host land over decades and, perhaps, an inability of the lesser-educated immigrants, particularly those who came under the family re-unification provisions of the 1965 immigration reforms, to integrate well into the local society. From the initial years of their migration, as they found their Indian culture to be one of the most identifiable and unifying aspects of their communities, many Indians who had not left their religious customs found ways to replicate their worship in the US, and religious spaces soon became political organizing grounds. Sikhs, Hindus, Muslims, and, to some extent Christians, started organizing around religious identity and collected funds to build places of worship. The first Hindu Temple in the West was formally dedicated as early as in 1908, built under the auspices of the Ram Krishna Mission, Calcutta.²⁰ In 1915, Sikhs in Stockton, California built the first Gurdwara—or Sikh temple—in US. In the following decades, such constructions occurred across the US almost on a competitive basis, and such activities may have helped in consolidating communal feelings within different Indian communities.

From the late 20th century onwards, the political ideology of *Hindutva* gained ground in some sections of the Indian American community. *Hindutva* broadly refers to a vision of India based on a cultural nationalism rooted in the majoritarian religious customs and traditions of Hindus. As explained by Thervath (2012), the difficulties experienced by migrants lent credence among Hindu nationalists to the syndrome of the oppressed majority, a belief that Hinduism was under attack. The *Hindutva* group of organizations were led by the *Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh* (RSS) and consisted of the political wing *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP), the student group *Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad*, the religious wing *Vishwa Hindu Parishad*, and other organizations collectively known as the *Sangh Paivar*, meaning the “family of the ‘Sangh’,” short for RSS (Thervath, 2012, pp. 5-6). In the name of cultural education, groups such as *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* attempted communalizing the younger generation of Indian Americans with organizations such as the Hindu Students Council. According to the website of *Vishwa Hindu Parishad*, the Hindu Students Council, floated in 1987, is one of its most successful programs, with chapters spread over 90 universities across the US. The divisive nature of communalized Indian American politics came to the fore in 2005, when Narendra Modi, the chief minister of the western state of Gujarat, who led a BJP government, was denied a visa to the US over his alleged complicity in the communal riots of 2002, in which scores of Muslims were massacred by frenzied mobs in reaction to the burning of train coaches in which Hindu pilgrims were travelling. The Asian American Hotel Owners Association (AAHOA), comprising largely Gujarati Hindus, who had invited Modi, witnessed a split, with one section supporting the US decision and the other holding a demonstration outside the State Department to protest the visa denial (Sirohi, 2005, p. 120). Some of those who protested Modi’s planned visit to the US were stamped as traitors by the *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* and other *Hindutva* organizations in the US. Interestingly, leaders of the Gujarati diaspora urged politicians in India to curb overzealous protests to protect the interests of the Gujarati community in the US, which numbered over 500,000 at that time (Desai, 2005, p. 12).

Another issue is the persistence of caste divisions. The ancient Indian practice of a caste system was evident in the status structure of Indians in the US from the early years of their immigration

(Jacoby, 1956, pp. 14-15) and seemed to have continued into the 21st century, despite resistance from left-leaning organizations. In the words of Soundararajan, “The Indian diaspora thrives on caste because it is the atom that animates the molecule of their existence. In the face of xenophobia and racism abroad, many become more fundamentalist in their traditions and caste is part of that reactionary package”. She notes that caste-based intolerance in the diaspora is dangerous, as it extends beyond individual relationships. She claims, “Individuals build institutions and institutions are steeped in caste.” From Hindu temples to Gurdwaras, there is a separate yet unspoken policy of worship for those that are *Dalit*, a collective term for those belonging to the lower castes in India, says Soundararajan, who also notes that in South Asian and Asian studies departments in North America, there are less than a handful of tenured faculty belonging to such castes (Soundararajan, 2012). Dalit groups in the diaspora, such as the *International Dalit solidarity Network* and the *Dalit Freedom Network* have tried to foreground the issue of caste in global discussions, but such attempts are hindered by the Indian government’s insistence that caste falls outside the scope of the International Convention for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination and its refusal to discuss caste discriminations in global fora such as United Nations World Conference against Racism. Periodically, caste-based issues come to the fore in the Indian American diaspora. Instances include the opposition expressed by some Indian Americans to the naming of South Asian chair in Columbia University after its alumnus B. R. Ambedkar, a leader of the “untouchable” in India who was also one of the key authors of India’s constitution. When Dalit leaders from India were invited by US congressmen to discuss issues of caste discrimination and untouchability, the Hindu American Front protested against the invitation (Omvedt, 2005).

Over the years, Indians in the US have come a long way since the days of pre-independence political activism. After the immigration reforms of 1965, the Indian diaspora in the US witnessed tremendous demographic growth and achieved considerable financial clout, which led to attempts at garnering political influence. Starting with fund-raising events for politicians in the US at local, state, and national levels, Indians developed a lobbying presence in the US Congress. Indian organizations in the US consolidated their financial contributions for both the welfare of the community and to improve attitudes in US towards India. The following section discusses these aspects.

Participation in Host Land Politics

Gradually asserting their presence in the US political landscape particularly in the past three decades, Indian community members have contested, campaigned, and participated in the US electoral process. Dalip Singh Saund, the first Indian-origin member of US Congress was elected from California’s 29th Congressional District in 1956, becoming also the first Asian to hold such a position (Patterson, 1992). In a way, Saund opened the doors to what would soon become the political clout of a community that saw the emergence of a handful of local and national level politicians of Indian origin. It may be noted, however, that the politically-oriented activism of post-1965 Indian immigrants is a relatively new phenomenon. In the initial years of their migration, far away from their homeland, members of the Indian American community seemed to have been more keen to take part in activities aimed at preserving their cultural heritage than participate in the political process of the US, as is apparent from the creation of numerous community-level organizations in locations having a significant diasporic presence, such as California, New York, and New Jersey.²¹ Collectives were formed along lines of religion, caste, language, and region, in organizations such as the Federation of Gujarat Associations in North America, the Telugu Association of North America, and the Bengali Association of North Americas. Mainly only after the flow to the US of Indian professionals in the

1970s were organizations based on professional streams formed to safeguard the interests of their professional members. These organizations include the American Association of Physicians of Indian Origin and the Asian American Hotel Owners Association (HLCID, 200, p. 171).

One of the main catalysts for ethnic political organizing was the racial targeting of Indians in the 1980s. A gang calling itself “dot-busters”—dots referring to the ‘bindi’ worn on the forehead by Indian women—carried out attacks on Indians in New Jersey, spreading panic among community members and conveying to the community the urgent need for political activism. Racial discrimination at educational institutions, harassment at workplaces, and serious physical violence had been reported during the latter portion of the 20th century from various places in the US, especially in Chicago and New Jersey. Sheth (1993) noted that the factors contributing to such hatred were Indians’ geographical concentration within the US, lack of communication skills, foreign speech accents, cultural differences, and religious diversity, along with the perception that Asian Indians constituted a “model minority.”²² Indian political and professional organizations were formed to reduce this problem (Sheth, 1993, pp. 180-183). Perhaps the most traumatic events for the Indian American community occurred in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terror attacks on the US. Indians were targeted in many places in a spate of hate crimes that followed the tragedy. Sikhs, who, in the eyes of some Americans, appeared very similar to the Arab hijackers of the 9/11 attacks, became victims of some of these hate crimes (IPC, 2004; Goodstein & Lewin, 2001).

Having recognized the need for political activism, a number of special interest organizations and pressure groups were established by Indian Americans. While some endured the test of time, others sprang up as single-cause organizations and eventually disappeared. The Indian American Leadership Initiative trained some 300 young Indian Americans in election fundraising and media relations by 2004. The Indian American Center for Political Awareness organized a Washington Leadership Program aimed at politically equipping second generation Indian Americans. These two organizations channeled political contributions in such a way that Indian Americans got better returns from politicians on issues like immigration and outsourcing (Rajghatta, 2005). The US India Political Action Committee (USINPAC), created in 2002, based its structure and methods on the American Israel Public Affairs Committee and engaged in activities to promote India-Israel and India-US relations (Basu, 2004, p. 52; Hathaway, 2004, pp. 68-72).

The Indian American community’s attempt to influence the electoral process has mainly employed a two-fold approach: (a) fund raising and (b) the creation of special-purpose groups to support particular candidates. Organizations such as the Indian American Forum for Political Education provided campaign contributions to candidates in local and national elections. Ten delegates represented Indian Americans in the Democratic National Convention of 1992. In 1996, the community’s contribution to congressional and presidential election campaigns was estimated at \$5 million, which doubled in 2000, most of the funding benefiting the democrats (HLCID, 2001, pp. 173-174). Indian American entrepreneurs and computer scientists in California’s Silicon Valley contributed to the campaigns of both George W. Bush and Al Gore during the 2000 presidential race. After the Republicans introduced more pro-India language in their campaigns, the money went mainly to Bush. In 2002, Indian Americans focused on returning the nearly 150 members of the India Caucus (discussed below) in the mid-term elections. Community organizations distributed list of candidates favored by Indian Americans in constituencies where Indians resided in significant numbers, along with analyst opinions on the party-leanings of each race.

The 2004 presidential polls were an election in which Indians were not only donors for both republicans and democrats, but also in which they sought to become players in politics at the grassroots level, especially with respect to registration efforts and ensuring that eligible Indian

American voters actually voted (Srivatsava, 2004; Nordlinger, 2004). The Indian community was visible in both the democratic and republican camps in the form of two campaign organizations: the Indian American Network for Bush-Cheney and the South Asians for Kerry. The basic aim of both groups was to address the community's interests. To this end, in the run-up to the polls, USINPAC held policy dialogues with both Bush and Kerry. The Indian American Republican Council, founded by Raghavendra Vijayanagar, raised millions of dollars for the Bush campaign. Those who supported Kerry included Sabeer Bhatia, the founder of Hotmail, hotelier Sant Chatwal, and industrialist Ramesh Kapur. A number of physicians may have supported Bush because of his promise to curb rampant medical malpractice suits and bring about tort reform. The Indian community aimed to take full advantage of the fact that a few thousand votes could make a difference in the 2004 elections (Sen, 2004, pp. 55-57). In the crucial state of Florida, where Indian doctors supported Bush, Indian Americans may have helped swing the verdict. States like Illinois saw unprecedented rise in first-time Indian American voters (Vinayak & Vasudev, 2004, p. 51).

Indian Americans, along with the larger Asian American community, emerged a significant political constituency by the 2008 presidential elections (Fennerty, 2008, pp. 56-57) and consolidated their position in 2012 elections. According to a survey conducted by the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (2008), 2008 polls revealed that 69% of Indian Americans were enrolled in the Democratic Party compared to 7% in the Republican Party. Out of those surveyed, 91% Indian Americans said they voted for Barack Obama, while 8% voted for John McCain. The National Asian American survey on the 2012 elections showed that 84% of Indian Americans voted for Obama, while 16% voted for Mitt Romney.

There was a long "silence" in terms of an Indian-origin political voice in the US Congress after the tenure of Dalip Singh Saund. Bobby Jindal changed that in 2004. Jindal was a candidate for the governor's post of Louisiana, but lost the race. In the 2004 elections, he was catapulted to the US House of Representatives, proving that it was possible for a person to enter mainstream American politics while belonging to a demographically insignificant community. The Indian American community had bankrolled his campaign in its initial days (Padmanabhan, 2004, p. 52). In the 2012 elections, Dr. Ami Bera became the third Indian-American elected to Congress. He was elected to the House of Representatives from California's 7th Congressional District (O'Keefe, 2012). Other successful local Indian American politicians include Nikki Randhawa Haley, the governor of South Carolina, Satveer Chaudhary, who was state senator from Minnesota (Narayana, 2001, p. 16-17), Nimi McConingely, a legislator from Wyoming, and Kumar P. Barve, the majority leader in the Maryland State legislature.

Attempts to Influence US-India Relations

From an international relations perspective, the attempts by non-state actors such as diasporas to influence bilateral and regional politics has gained the attention of scholars particularly in the last decade. The larger context behind the Indian Americans' attempts to influence India-US relations is the so-called "arch rivalry" between India and Pakistan, who are often referred to as two nuclear-armed neighbors within striking distance of each other. The belligerence and toxic rhetoric that has often characterized regional flare-ups seems to have resulted in similar passions among diasporic communities, particularly when, internationally, the two sides are engaged in armed conflicts, as they were in 1999 and in the aftermath of the attack on Indian parliament in 2003 and the Mumbai terror attacks of 2008.

Indian Americans' attempt at lobbying local politicians has been partially aimed at the long-term interest of bridging the gap in perceptions in the US about India. Indians have often been disappointed by the stance taken by the US on the disputed territory of Kashmir and the refusal by successive US administrations to term Pakistan a terrorist state despite evidence of its support of cross-border terrorism in India. This perceived sense among Indian Americans of a US bias toward Pakistan or a "Pakistan-tilt" in US foreign policy has served as a strong motivator to the Indian community in US to get involved in the international politics.

Indian American lobbying has functioned within the larger framework of the lobbying activities of both the Indian and Pakistan governments, with which diasporic communities from the two countries seem to have partnered, willingly or otherwise. The formation of India Caucuses in both houses of the US Congress and the creation of political action committees could be counted as part of these activities. Both Indian and Pakistani embassies in the US have in the past hired professional lobbyists to influence US foreign policy in their favor. For instance, the lobbying firm Neil and Co. was instrumental in the early 1980s in restoring US aid to Pakistan, despite Pakistan's nuclear program (Mohammad-Arif, 2000). India also spent huge sums of money on lobbyists. For instance, it hired two lobbying firms in 1999-2000, Verner Liipfert at a rate of \$50,000 per-month and APCO Associates, for \$25,000 per month (LSD, 2000).

The need for lobbying Congress was felt by the Indian American community in the 1990s. In 1993, when Bill Clinton became president, the post of an Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia Affairs was created in the US State Department, and Robin Raphael, the then Assistant Secretary for Near-east Affairs, was given the charge. It was also a time when cross-border infiltration and Pakistan-sponsored terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir was on the rise in India. In the eyes of Indian Americans, Raphael appeared to favor Pakistan and openly criticize India in her congressional testimonies and overall functioning. To the Indian American community activists, she was the "cowboy" who lectured senior Indian ministers on the Kashmir policy of the United States (Diwanji, 2000). Indian Americans saw Raphael as an example of the pervasive American ignorance about India, its foreign policy imperatives, and its stance on issues such as non-proliferation, economic reforms, national security, and terrorism, as well as its relations with Pakistan. This led Indians to think of creating a strong lobby vehicle in the Congress, namely the India Caucus. The Indian American Forum for Political Education was instrumental in its creation (Diwanji, 2000). The community decided to target those representatives whose electorates had large Indian populations, like those of the state of New Jersey. Three representatives were targeted, including Frank Pallone. When the bipartisan Congressional Caucus on India and Indian Americans in the House of Representatives was formed in 1993, Pallone became its first chairman, and the group counted among its members representatives such as Gary Ackerman, Sherrod Brown, Jim McDermott, and Bill McCollum.

Over the years, the India Caucus grew as the most concrete example of the political clout of the Indian community in the US (Haniffa, 2003). Its membership went up to 164 in 10 years, making it the largest caucus promoting the cause of a single country. The Indian community managed such a lobby group without sending even a single Indian-origin member to the Congress, at least till 2004, when Bobby Jindal became the second Indian American congressman. The numerical strength of the India Caucus—more than a quarter of the entire House of Representatives—was such that it could not be ignored while putting to vote any bill that mattered to the Indian community, in particular, and US foreign policy issues concerning India, in general. As Rubinoff noted, by enlisting floor speakers, lining up votes, and placing material in the Congressional Record, the India Caucus had for the first time provided India with an institutional base of support on Capitol Hill (Rubinoff, 2002, p. 447). It promoted pro-India legislations and defeated anti-India resolutions and amendments. One congressman

who faced the power of the caucus was Dan Burton, a very vigorous critic of India, who used to bring in amendments calling for reducing of aid to India on account of what he called its “poor human rights record.” In 1992, Burton had succeeded in making the House adopt his amendment. But the House-Senate Conference Committee dropped the provision, which would have cut aid to India worth \$24 million (Hathaway, 2002, p. 401). In subsequent years, the India Caucus voted out his amendments whenever he introduced them: In 1996 by 169 votes and in 1997 by 260 votes. After drafting amendments for three more years without even introducing them, Burton conceded that the Indian lobby in the Congress would “beat [him] to the ground” (US Congress, 1999c, p. H6825).

The pro-India legislators in the caucus helped defeat bills and amendments that were deemed detrimental to the interests of India. In July 22, 1999, the House defeated an amendment moved by Republican Congressman William P. Goodling, seeking to bar US military aid to any country that did not vote with Washington at least 25 % of the time at the United Nations. Though the amendment was worded in general terms, the India Caucus urged every congressman and state legislator to vote against it because they felt it was detrimental to India, leading to its defeat by 256-169 votes (US Congress, 1999b, pp. H6027-6058). The caucus also actively lobbied to push through the Faleomavaega amendment, which asked the US president to certify that Pakistan had stopped fomenting cross-border terrorism in India and that it had halted proliferation of nuclear weapons technology before receiving US arms aid (US Congress, 2003, p. H6729).

Members of the India Caucus spoke in the House floor to draw attention to issues of interest to India, such as the military coup in Pakistan, nuclear tests, cross-border terrorism, and democracy. In their remarks, the congressmen periodically argued in favor of better India-US ties. The caucus members called for Pakistan to be named a terrorist state (US Congress, 2000, pp. H48-49) and for repealing sanctions imposed against India after the 1998 nuclear tests. In 1999, Frank Pallone and Gary Ackerman justified India’s Agni II missile tests on the House floor, citing the Chinese threat to India’s security (US Congress, 1999, pp. H1872-H1873).

Indian Americans worked behind the scenes in the finalizing of the visit of President Bill Clinton to India as well as the return visit of Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee to the US (Mohammad-Arif, 2000, p. 7). The community and caucus were active in giving Vajpayee the rare honor of addressing both houses of the US Congress. On April 29, 2004, Sanjay Puri, the Executive Director of USINPAC, announced the formation of a bipartisan Senate version of the India Caucus, named the “Friends of India.”²³ Hillary Clinton and John Cornyn were the first co-chairs of the Senate Caucus.²⁴ Perhaps the most important recent example of the role played by Indian Americans in US-India relations was in the promotion of the India-US civil nuclear deal. Since its announcement after Prime Minister Manmohan Singh’s US visit in July 18, 2005, Indian Americans campaigned to push the enabling legislation through Congress. There were many congressmen from Texas who favored the deal, largely due to the efforts of Indian diaspora living in the state. Out of the 37 co-sponsors of the enabling legislation, nearly half were from Texas, including 15 representatives and both senators of the State (Rajghatta, 2006; McIntire, 2006). Indian Americans, for a while, broke the stereotype of factionalism: “They hired lobbyists, organized fund-raisers and called congressmen, letting them know their views on the bill. They may have made the critical difference in stymieing non-proliferation ayatollahs in and outside Congress and ensuring overwhelming bipartisan backing of the bill,” wrote *The Times of India* newspaper in an editorial.²⁵

It can be observed that major political trends in the South Asian region had a “mirroring effect” on the Indian diaspora in the US. The community was active in campaigning against Pakistan in the US during the height of the India-Pakistan crises.²⁶ During tensions in the region stemming from the nuclear tests and the Kargil conflict that followed, US politicians were inundated with correspondence

from Indian Americans, much of it from the financially influential corners of Silicon Valley.²⁷ Indian Americans raised funds to help the country during the Kargil conflict. After the nuclear tests, Indian Americans did all they could to convince the US administration of the rationale behind India's going nuclear (Basu, 2001; HLCID, 2001, p. 174). It is also argued that the community played a role in the Bill Clinton-Nawaz Sharif meeting, which contributed to the end of Kargil conflict in 1999. Indeed, when the rapprochement between the two countries began, the immigrant organizations "mirrored" the activities overseas so closely that the Indians and Pakistanis in US held Independence Day marches together.²⁸

Despite all these actions by the community, it may be pointed out that the ability of the Indian diaspora in US to influence the congressional agenda is still limited due to a variety of factors, not least because the community is yet to become a significant voting constituency. There has also been criticism that the India Caucus was being used as a "fund-raising vehicle" for its members and that the Indian-American community was being exploited. Though community groups like AAHOA, The IndUS Entrepreneurs, and the AAPI were active in identifying legislative agendas at the national level, and several other groups had been active at the local level, critics say that for the most part, the community had been ineffective in the legislative arena (Parekh, 2000).

While lobbying may be important in international politics, there are many grey areas to this practice from which expatriate communities may have to stay away. For example, there were times when the Indian community, with its ability to apply political leverage, felt it was being taken for granted by the politicians of India, who sometimes expected the US community to act on behalf of their homeland—even on occasions on which the Indian American community did not agree with the policies of their home governments or ruling parties (Haniffa, 2001). It is also true that at least some of the American politicians were more motivated by the financial prospects of lobbying for the community than by any genuine interest to see bilateral relations with India improve (Haniffa, 2001). As such, diaspora lobbying has sometimes appeared to degenerate into a by-product of check-book diplomacy, as exemplified by the Lalit Gadhia trial.²⁹ At times, Indian community members were also portrayed in the US as agents of the government at home.³⁰ The community was sometimes made to feel as though they were being manipulated for political ends, while the increasing numbers in the India Caucus was seen as a profitable business for the legislators because of the financial clout of the community.³¹ In 2001, Jim McDermott, the democratic co-chairman of the India Caucus, said many congressmen were interested only in "[beefing] up their own campaign coffers." Though the India Caucus is one of the largest of its kind, only a fraction of its members were committed to helping the community or making a tangible contribution to improving Indo-US relations, he said.³² Such observations make it imperative for the community to re-assess the limits of ethnic lobbying.

Conclusion

Taking the Asian Indians as a case study, this essay has attempted to provide evidence that transnational diasporic political activism is not a new phenomenon. The essay has located in history the main strands of the political activity of the Indian American community. It is observed that immigration reforms, citizenship regulations, and land ownership restrictions impact the ability of diasporic communities to engage in political activism. The essay examined the main types of political activism of the Indian American community: the ones that connect the diaspora with host land politics and homeland politics, along with ones that foster the bilateral relationship between the two countries. It illustrated that in spite of numerical insignificance, a financially capable community can influence the electoral politics of the host land as well as the bilateral ties between the homeland and host land. It

showed how living conditions and racial prejudices in the host land may act as catalysts to political organizing of ethnic communities, as evidenced by the case of Indian community. It also highlighted some of the problematic areas within diasporic political activism, particularly those arising from a perception that the community is seen occasionally as the agents of the homeland government or as milch cows for the host land's political leaders.

As the Indian community in US comes of age both in terms of numbers and financial capabilities, the history and historiography of its political role will evolve: the history will evolve as a new breed of scholars, including those from the younger generation of persons of Indian origin born in US, seek more details about their social and political heritage, as exemplified in attempts like the South Asian American Digital Archive. The historiography will evolve as more realistic appraisals and interpretations of the political capabilities of the community are carried out beyond the overt hype generally seen in contemporaneous media, both in India and in the Indian American ethnic press in the US. Scholars like Gottschlich highlight the limits of Indian American political representation that fails to take account of working class members of the diaspora and mentions the relatively small percentage of Indian Americans eligible to vote, as many are recent migrants still holding Indian citizenship (Gottschlich, 2008, pp. 156 -169). Similarly, in a realistic appraisal, Gupta brings forth important aspects like the apolitical nature of many Indian Americans; a new generation of South Asian Americans who may not share the ideas of, or be interested in, the India-Pakistan rivalry; the still small proportion of Indian American campaign financing (when compared to billions being spent on elections); and the continuing demographic insignificance of the community (Gupta, 2004).

Given the relatively small demographic and financial imprint, in order to be more effective in the local politics of US, Indian Americans may have to seek alliances with other ethnic groups, particularly with the larger Asian American community but also with the Hispanic and black groups in order to be an effective special interest group in the politics of the US—though the question remains as to whether the self-image of many of the elite in the Indian American community would allow for such rainbow coalitions to materialize.

¹ "Seniors Rescue Hindus from University of California Hazing Crowd," *San Francisco Chronicle*, San Francisco, 16 August, 1921.

² "Hindus Driven Out: Citizens at Marysville, California Attack Them- British Consul informed," *New York Times*, New York, 27 January 1908.

³ The organization had started off as Japanese and Korean Exclusion League. Formed in San Francisco in the spring of 1905, it changed its name in 1907 to Asiatic Exclusion League to widen its focus on Indians as also the Chinese (Jacoby, 1982, p. 36).

⁴ Jacoby noted that the establishment of 'Native American Party' in 1830s and 1840s, the 'Order of the United Americans' in 1844 and the 'Know Nothings' or 'American Party' in 1852 all testified to the early prevalence of a dislike of immigrants, though a formal legislation to restrict immigration came only later (Jacoby, 1982, p. 35).

⁵ "The Hindu Question," *Marysville Appeal*, 28 April, 1912:4.

⁶ With the tightening of immigration rules, some 3,000 Indians went back home between 1920 and 1940, mostly voluntarily and a few hundred as deportees. By 1930, Indians numbered 3,130, declining to 2,405 in 1940. Some 3,000 Indian farmers entered the US illegally through Mexico (Hess, 1982, p. 31).

⁷ Chandrasekhar noted that besides the Indian Army's help to fight as America's allies in WWII, a feeling that India was on the verge of an industrial awakening and that the passage of the bill would help provide a market for American manufactured goods may have also led to the inclusion of Indians in the bill (Chandrasekhar, 1982, p. 23).

⁸ An Indian lobbyist J. J. Singh played a key role in the passage of the Act (Gurmukh Singh, 2003).

⁹ In his veto message Truman wrote: “These are only a few examples of the absurdity, the cruelty of carrying over into this year of 1952 the isolationist limitations of our 1924 law. In no other realm of our national life are we so hampered and stultified by the dead hand of the past, as we are in this field of immigration.” Nonetheless, his veto was overridden by a vote of 278 to 113 in the House, and 57 to 26 in the Senate.

¹⁰ As per the 1965 law, immigrants from every nation in the world were allowed to enter, and once in the US, all people had equal rights, as no group would be considered superior or inferior to the other. No group needed to give up its group character and identity for acceptance into American economic, political, and social structure (Chandrasekhar, 1982, p. 26).

¹¹ The lower courts had been adhering to precedent established in the 1910 *US vs. Balsara* and the 1913 *Ajhoj Kumar Mazumdar* cases.

¹² “Hindus Too Brunette to Vote Here,” *The Literary Digest*, New York, No 76, 10 March 1923, p.13.

¹³ See Nationality Act 1940, Section 303 (a).

¹⁴ It may be mentioned here that the legislation did not go without opposition. During the debate on the 1940 bill, before it was amended by the Public Law 483, opposition Representative Robinson of Kentucky said, “I do assert ... that the people of India cannot and do not assimilate with the people of the United States, and I think it is unwise from every point of view to admit peoples to this county who do not readily assimilate with the characteristics, culture, ideology and the philosophies of government as well as with the religion of the people of our country ... We know the low standards of the teeming millions of the people of India and also their low wages [and] their caste system, under Indian ideals” (US Congress, 1945, p. H9539).

¹⁵ Juergensmeyer (1982, p. 48) noted that the hostility towards the prejudice of North American whites had identified itself with the nationalist struggle against the oppressors in India. The Gadar party, in his view, “was a compound of nationalism and communalism which they brought from India and the class consciousness and ethnic identity which they discovered in America.”

¹⁶ See Sidhu (2005) for a compilation of important documents related to the Komagata Maru incident.

¹⁷ For an early account of the Komagata Maru incident from a Canadian source, see Canadian Historical Association (1936).

¹⁸ Gadar, which literally means revolt or rebellion in the Urdu language, is a result of the idea of launching a movement from abroad for the revolutionary overthrow of the British government in India. For an assessment of the Gadar Movement, see Brown, E.C. (1982, pp. 41-48) and Juergensmeyer (1982, pp. 48-57), among others.

¹⁹ From documents of The Hindustan Gadar Party Memorial Committee, 1975.

²⁰ *San Francisco Chronicle*, 6 April, 1908.

²¹ The state of California accounts for the largest number of Indians followed by New York, New Jersey, Illinois and Texas. There are significant number of Indians in the states of Pennsylvania, Florida and Washington also.

²² The “model minority” myth serves as an excuse for justifying the exclusion of Asian Americans including Indians from programs related to education, health, housing and employment (Mishra & Mohapatra, 2002, p. 11).

²³ See USINPAC Newsletter, 29 April, 2004.

²⁴ See USINPAC Newsletter, 3 May, 2004.

²⁵ “Pravasi Power,” *The Times of India*, 22 December, 2006.

²⁶ See *The Economic Times*, 23 May, 2001 and *The Washington Post*, 9 October, 1999.

²⁷ See *The Washington Post*, 9 October, 1999 and *The New York Times*, 6 July, 1999.

²⁸ See *The Washington Times*, 15 August, 2003.

²⁹ In 1996, Lalit Gadhia, an Indian American lawyer and social activist, was sentenced to three months in jail after he admitted to channeling money from an Indian diplomat into US political campaigns. His sentencing led the Indian embassy to issue a clarification regarding such funds, saying, "We don't want Indian Americans to be perceived as Indian agents." After a long-drawn court case in the US, Gadhia was finally reinstated to the Maryland State bar in 2002. See *The Washington Post*, 9 October, 1999 and *News India Times*, 24 May, 2002.

³⁰ Sunil Agbi, a democrat activist and founder of the Indian American Political Foundation, was questioned by the FBI in July 2002 on whether he had monetary connections with Indian diplomats and embassy for lobbying for India-related matters. See *The Statesman*, 11 July, 2002.

³¹ For example, on September 30, 2002, Congresswoman Cynthia A McKinney told the House of Representatives that Indians (and the Indian embassy) were wrongfully and illegally funneling money to US electoral campaigns (US Congress, 2002, pp. E1710-E1711).

³² See *India Abroad*, 3 September, 2001.

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