Indian Diaspora in the United States and its Political Participation

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The Indian diasporic community in the United States is one among many ethnic communities, which have been increasingly visible in the last five decades. Although the flow of Indians as new ethnics started first as a trickle in 1895, their impact was really felt in the aftermath of the landmark 1965 Kennedy-Johnson immigration legislation. This “new immigration” group has begun to attract academic attention and has also been the focus of research by a number of scholars. The Asian Indian diaspora in the United States in recent times have also taken proactive interest in the political process of the country.

During Kennedy’s Administration, Dilip Singh Saund, a member of the Indian ethnic community, was successfully elected to the House of Representatives of the U.S. Congress. Since then, a number of persons of Indian origin have contested for various political offices under both party tickets (Democrats and Republicans). This Political participation by Asian Indians and their affiliated groups is also being reflected in the 2008 Presidential races of Republican John McCain and Democratic contenders in the primaries namely Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton.

In a way, it shows the maturity of the Indian ethnic community in the United States and their willingness and determination to participate in the politics of America. A number of organizations, such as India League of America and the Association of Asian Indians in North America have taken leading steps in this direction. In 1994, Kumar Brave and Upendra Chivukula - the first Indian Americans - from Maryland and New Jersey respectively were elected to their respective state legislatures. In the year 2000, Satveer Choudhary became the first state senator to be elected in Minnesota. He was re-elected in 2006 as well. Iowa State Representative Swati Dandekar, Democrat, also won for the third time. Several Indian-Americans have held the position of mayor as well. They include: Bala K. Srinivas in Hollywood Park, Texas, John Abraham in Teaneck, New Jersey, and Arun Jhaveri in Burien, Washington. Number of Indians has also become prominent at the national level. For instance, during Clinton administration, Dr. Arati Prabhakar was appointed as the Director of National Institute of Standards and Technology, Neil Dhillon as the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Transportation and Dr. Rajen Anand as Executive Director of Centre for Nutrition Policy under USDA. Similarly, Bobby Jindal was appointed as the Assistant Secretary of Health, Gopal Khanna, Chief Technology Officer of Peace Corps while Karan Bhatia was appointed as the Deputy Under Secretary in the Department of Commerce in the George Bush, Jr. administration.
During Barack Obama administration that took over on January 20, 2009, it has appointed a number of Indian Americans in key positions including Farah Pandith as US State Department’s representative to the muslim world, Rashad Hussain as US envoy to the 57-member Organization of Islamic Countries(OIC), Dr.Islam Siddiqui as US Chief Agricultural Negotiator, Dr Rajiv Shah, as the administrator of the United States Agency for International Development(USAID), etc. In the election held for the U.S. Congress on 6 November 2006, bucking the anti-Republican trend, incumbent Bobby Jindal won a thumping victory and got re-elected to the House of Representatives from Louisiana's 1st District, securing 88 per cent of the vote. Subsequently, Bobby Jindal was also elected as the Governor of Louisiana on October 20, 2007, thus becoming the first ever person of Asian Indian origin to hold such august office. His name is often being touted as a possible future US Vice Presidential or a Presidential candidate from the Republican party. Similarly, Nimrata Nikki Randhawa Haley won the 2010 South Carolina gubernatorial election and in the process, became the second person of Indian-American origin and the first woman to serve as Governor of South Carolina.

These candidates were actively supported by the Asian Indian diaspora residing in the United States. In the past few elections, Asian Indian donors have financed and campaigned for members of both political parties. In some cases, Asian Indian donors are supporting candidates from both the Democratic party and the Republican party in a single Congressional district. It will still take some time before Indians make their presence felt more visible on the political landscape. It is important to note, however, that on matters of importance to India, be it signing Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), Outsourcing of jobs to India, Sale of sophisticated offensive weapon systems to Pakistan that could be used against India, a proactive role for India on the Afghanistan issue, negotiations on climate change and global warming, civilian nuclear deal, etc, Indian diaspora have courted support on both sides of the political aisle for promoting and enhancing India’s national interest.

During President Barack Obama’s November 7-9, 2010, visit to India, Asian Indians residing in the United States have been instrumental in the shaping of several important policy measures including voicing support for India’s entry as a permanent member in the UN Security Council, supporting India’s full membership in the four multilateral export control regimes( Nuclear Suppliers Group, Missile Technology Control Regime, Australian Group, and Wassenaar Arrangements), US-India High Technology Cooperation, Commitment for UN Democracy Fund and Singh-Obama 21st Century Knowledge Initiative – all geared towards inclusive growth, mutual prosperity and strategic and economic cooperation between the world’s two largest democracies.

A coalition pattern, in conjunction with other ethnic groups, such as Italian Americans, Greek Americans, Japanese Americans, Mexican Americans, etc, may be an ideal type for the Asian Indians to pursue. At the formative stages of building up a political front, these steps leading towards ethnic solidarity are an interesting proposition.

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