

BOOKS



ABOVE: Indian immigration to the United States after 1965 was dominated by a highly skilled group who became economically prosperous.



Coming to America

The making of the South Asian diaspora in the United States

/ POLITICS

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ON A SEPTEMBER NIGHT IN 1907, an angry mob of about six hundred white people attacked and destroyed an Asian Indian settlement in Bellingham, in the north-western US state of Washington. Many of the traumatised residents fled to Canada. A San Francisco-based organisation called the Asiatic Exclusion League, dedicated to “the preservation of the Caucasian race upon American soil,” blamed the victims for the riot, adding that the “filthy and immodest habits” of Indians invited such attacks. Despite the small number of Indians in the United States—there were fewer than 4,000 at the time—the Asiatic Exclusion League had been warning of a “Hindu invasion” of the country’s west coast. Two months later, another angry white mob struck a settlement of Indian workers in Everett, Washington, forcibly driving them out of the town. In 1910, the US Immigration Commission on the Pacific Coast deemed Indians “the most undesirable of all Asiatics” and called for their exclusion.

Many anti-immigrant laws had already been enacted against other Asian communities, starting with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. In 1907, a new law in the western US state of Oregon barred all Indians from becoming permanent residents (the state had long excluded black people). In 1913, California passed the Alien Land Law, mainly targeted at Japanese immigrants, after which California’s attorney general also barred Indians from owning property

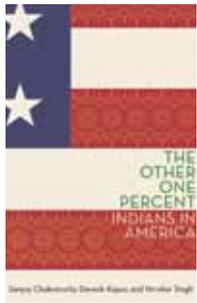
in the state. In 1914, at a congressional hearing on “Hindu immigration” led by a vitriolic representative from the seventh congressional district of California, Indians were variously called “a menace,” “thick-headed and obtuse,” illiterate, carriers of strange diseases, people who worked “too hard for too little,” and, according to a purportedly “scientific” document, “likely to deplete the vitality of our people, as the Negro had done.”

Now fast-forward a century. In an expression of poetic justice, California’s voters elected Kamala Harris, an Indian American, as the state’s attorney general in 2010. Two years later, the same seventh congressional district of California elected Ami Bera, another Indian American, as its congressman. Today, there are over three million Indian Americans, making up 1 percent of the US population. They are by far the richest and most educated ethnic group in one of the richest and most powerful countries in the world. They are disproportionately employed in high-status, high-skill professions. Their median household income is nearly twice as high as that of white households in the US, and they attain graduate and professional degrees at nearly four times higher rates than whites. They furnish over 10 percent of the labour force in computer-related and many other technical fields. Indian Americans have served as CEOs of some of the most iconic US corporations, including Microsoft, Google,

Adobe, PepsiCo, Mastercard, McKinsey and Citibank. They are also increasingly becoming visible in spaces that have long been inhospitable to them, such as politics, arts and media. Add to this their low rates of poverty, incarceration, divorce and reliance on public welfare, and one can see why Indian Americans are sometimes called a “model minority” in the United States.

What explains this dramatic reversal of fortune for Indian Americans? Who are the Indians who went to the United States, and what new identities did they forge there? What impact have they had on politics and economics back home?

Two recent works of scholarship attempt to answer these and various other questions—*The Other One Percent: Indians in America* by Sanjoy Chakravorty, Devesh Kapur and Nirvikar Singh, and *Desis Divided: The Political Lives of South Asian Americans*, by Sangay K Mishra. All four authors are Indian American academics at US universities. Both works show considerable empirical and argumentative rigour, and present engaging accounts of the early history of the community’s presence in the United States. *One Percent* largely draws on demographic data of patterns of migration and settlement by Indian Americans, and tracks the changing social composition and political attitudes of the community. *Desis Divided*, as its title indicates, explores the contested political landscape of South Asian immigrants in the United States—migrants



The Other One Percent: Indians in America
 Sanjoy Chakravorty, Devesh Kapur and Nirvikar Singh
 OUP USA
 384 pages, \$34.95

from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and Sri Lanka, who are sometimes collectively referred to as “desis”—through 60 in-depth interviews with leaders and activists of Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi descent. Both works track these communities’ demographic growth over the last five decades, as well as their social composition and political attitudes. *One Percent* focusses only on Indian Americans, who make up 80 percent of all South Asians in the United States, and sometimes assumes a celebratory tone that is largely deaf to the diaspora’s political impact on India. In contrast, *Desis Divided* explores the overlapping identities and internal divisions among South Asian Americans, but is overly optimistic about the mobilising potential of a unified “South Asian” identity that transcends ethnic, national or religious labels. Taken together, however, they offer an excellent sociological portrait of desi Americans as a people.

TO UNDERSTAND HOW FAR South Asian Americans have come, it is helpful to reflect on their humble beginnings nearly two hundred years ago. Although the name of the first South Asian migrant is not known, among the early immigrants were “six or seven Indian sailors’ brought to New England seminaries in the 1820s,” according to *One Percent*. Its authors cite data showing that by 1870 there were 586 US residents who had been born in British-ruled India; by 1900, there were 2,031. A few years earlier, in 1893, the Hindu reformer Swami Vivekananda, whom the American press referred to as the “Hindoo monk of India,” visited Chicago to represent Hinduism at the first-ever Parliament of the World’s Religions, a forum convened for global interfaith dialogue.

In the early years of the twentieth century, hundreds of South Asians, mostly Sikhs but also many Muslims, came to North America from Punjab—the vast majority of them former soldiers who had served in the British colonial army in East Asia. Instead of returning home, to a farming economy under severe stress due to British colonial policies, they sought their fortunes in various settlements on the west coast, between Vancouver and San Francisco. Others from their rural communities in Punjab soon followed. Many of them worked on the Western Pacific Railroad, in lumber and construction, or as agricultural labourers.

Around the same time, a few Muslim traders from Bengal also reached the east coast of the United States, and began peddling “exotic” wares from India, such as embroidered silks, rugs and perfumes. Some stayed on in New Orleans and married black or creole women. Many Bengali Muslim sailors jumped British ships when they docked in US cities. A few South Asians even came to study at US universities. For example, Bhimrao

In 1923, the US supreme court ruled that Indians were not racially white. As a result, the US government took away their right to naturalisation, and even revoked the citizenship of those already naturalised, including Indian Americans who had served in the US Army.

Ramji Ambedkar, the future Dalit icon and architect of the Indian constitution, attended Columbia University as a PhD student, in New York City, between 1913 and 1916. In the early twentieth century, a massive demographic upheaval was underway in the United States. Millions of Catholics, Orthodox Christians and Jews had emigrated from eastern and southern Europe, provoking strong xenophobic and nativist hostility. South Asians too, all officially classified as “Hindus,” attracted this hostility, often disproportionately so, as according to US government data, there were still fewer than 5,000 of them in the United States. Partly this was because they were seen as competitive labour, willing to do local jobs for less pay, and partly because of rampant racism and anti-Asian sentiment.

In the 1860s, after the US Civil War, citizenship had been extended to all African Americans and to anyone born in the United States, including the children of Indian and other immigrants. However, only white immigrants could become “naturalised”—granted US citizenship after migrating to the country and fulfilling a set of eligibility criteria. By the early twentieth century, however, a few foreign-born Indian immigrants had become US citizens by exploiting ambiguities in the pseudoscientific race theories of the time, by claiming a “north Indian Aryan” ethnicity and hence membership among Caucasians and “free whites.” But in 1923, the country’s Supreme Court, in *United States vs Bhagat Singh Thind*, ruled that while Indians may be Caucasian, they were not white “in the understanding of the common man,” and that this prevailing view would be backed by the law. According to *One Percent*, following the judgment the US government took away the right to naturalisation from Indian Americans, and even revoked the citizenship of those who had already been naturalised, including Indian Americans who had served in the US Army. Indian immigrants were shut out of whites-only schools, swimming pools

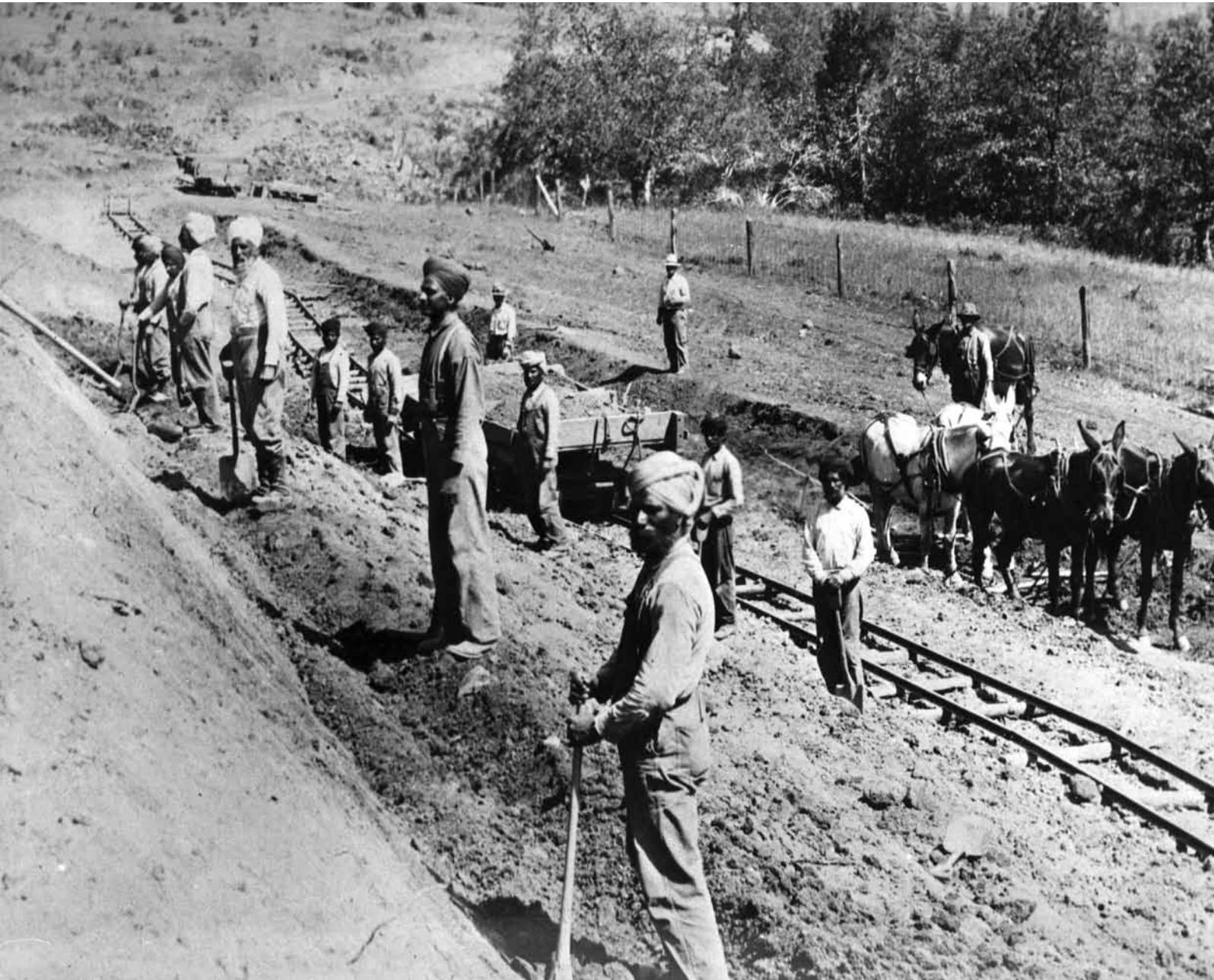
OPPOSITE PAGE:
 In the early twentieth century Punjabi immigrants on the west coast worked as farmers, mill workers and also built the railways. They were among the poorest and least educated immigrant groups in the United States.

and barbershops. White American women who married Indian men lost their citizenship, becoming stateless in their own country. Laws that banned marriage between white people and non-white people played a role in making Punjabi-Mexican marriages a norm on the west coast. The Immigration Acts of 1917 and 1924 instituted race-based national quotas for immigration, and entirely banned the immigration of Indians.

In the face of discrimination and limited opportunities, many Indian Americans returned to India. By 1940, the

number of US residents born in India had dwindled to just 2,405. Their educational attainment, according to the 1940 census, was the lowest among all racial and ethnic groups. After 1952, the government allowed a small number of Indians to immigrate to the United States. The population of Indian Americans began to grow by a few hundred a year. Some Gujaratis in northern California, mobilising their caste and kin networks, started running small motels after purchasing them from white people. By 1960, there were 12,296 Indian Americans in the United States.

Then came the biggest catalyst for the rise of desi Americans: the US Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. This act scrapped the old immigration system based on racial and national quotas that favoured Europeans over others, and replaced it with a system that gave preference to immigrants with specific skills that were in demand in the United States, as well as to those who already had family members in the country or who were fleeing persecution. On the one hand, the shift was driven by progressive ideas about racial equality advanced by





SOUTH ASIAN AMERICAN DIGITAL ARCHIVE / SUSAN PATEL

the US civil-rights movement, which removed the bias in earlier immigration policies towards white European immigrants. On the other hand, it was the result of Cold War rivalry in science and technology with the Soviet Union, and the drive to accelerate national economic growth, which meant that the US needed highly skilled workers, particularly in technical fields. Indian immigration after 1965, according to *One Percent*, is unique in American immigration history because a major set among the migrants was exceptionally skilled. Chakravorty, Kapur and Singh argue that, “In large part, the story of Indians in America is one of selection.” They persuasively illustrate how the post-1965 Indian American population “does not resemble any other population anywhere: not the Indian population in India, nor the native population in the United States, nor any other immigrant group from any other nation.” They write:

In fact, it is possible to suggest a form of “triple selection” that created this

unique population. First, India’s social hierarchies and historic discriminations selected certain groups like Brahmins and other “high” or “dominant” castes for education, ranging from the primary level all the way up to college. Second, the rationing of seats in higher education enabled a high-stakes, examination-based selection from within the already-selected group. Third, the U.S. immigration system selected within this doubly-selected group when it favored skills, especially skills in engineering and technology, to award employment and student visas. Thus, an increasing majority of Indians in the United States were triply selected.

The Indian government had invested heavily in English-medium public higher education in science and technology—in places such as the Indian Institutes of Technology, which were mostly fed by urban English-medium private schools—even while grossly neglecting public primary education. This

system soon produced tens and later hundreds of thousands of engineers amid a sea of functionally illiterate people. This talent pool was composed almost wholly of men from elite castes and classes, who were only too eager to escape from a country that could not offer them enough opportunity to apply their skills. And so the demands of the US labour market were met with a ready supply. “The success of Indian Americans,” the *One Percent* authors argue, “arose not from some imprecise ‘psychological’ characteristics, but from the fact that they were selected to succeed.” An Indian American is 10,000 times more likely to have a PhD than an Indian in India. The authors add that members of the elite castes, who are numerically a minority in India, form a large majority of Indian Americans. Although this group, “at the giving end of discrimination” in India, found itself “at the receiving end (albeit in a much milder way),” it came to the United States “equipped with a strong ballast of cultural capital, making it particularly suited to ascend

the ladder of American society.” Relative to other large Asian immigrant groups, the authors claim, Indian Americans’ greater comfort with cultural diversity, and also their high rates of marriage and low rates of divorce, may have helped them attain economic success.

This “triple selection” has shaped my story too. I am an IIT graduate from an upper caste, who went to the United States to study computer engineering and then worked in Silicon Valley for more than two decades before returning to India. I often call myself an Indian American. My partner is a US-born Indian American. Some of my best friends and closest family members are Indian American. I have often heard a sentimental, self-affirming narrative among Indian Americans—that they built up their fortunes after coming to the United States with little more than two suitcases—that is at odds with the view *One Percent* provides. As with privileged minorities everywhere, Indian Americans are likely to overlook how their social advantages in India contributed to their success as immigrants. Instead many attribute their prosperity only to personal merit and hard work and see themselves as self-made and thus deserving of their rewards. A great many Indian Americans, including most of my family and friends, still seem willfully blind to the reality of caste in India, its centrality to Hinduism and its role in shaping outcomes in their own lives.

One Percent divides the post-1965 period of immigration into three phases: the early movers, who came before 1980; the families, who arrived between 1980 and 1994; and the IT generation, who arrived after 1994. The early movers were the most educated and skilled; 45 percent of them had professional degrees. They came at the rate of about 12,000 per year, and Gujaratis were the largest subgroup among them. The second phase, when the leading basis of admission was family connections, was dominated by Gujaratis and Punjabis, who, among Indian migrants, had the deepest roots in the country at the time. In this phase, about 30,000 migrants arrived each year, a third of whom had professional degrees. The post-1994 migrants are overwhelmingly Tamil and Telugu men, who are selected based on their education and skills (though family visas continue to be granted in large numbers). The migrants in this last phase initially came at the rate of 65,000 per year. The influx later grew to over 120,000 per year, especially after US corporations lobbied to increase the number of H-1B visas—temporary visas given to workers in specialised professions. This inflow also included many students, most of whom, after graduation, converted their student visas into temporary work visas and stayed on in the United States. The authors of *One Percent* esti-

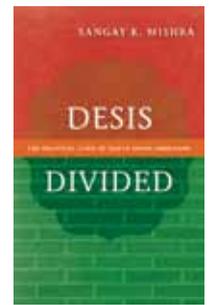
mate that 90 percent of these temporary visa holders eventually become permanent residents.

Only China now exceeds India as a source of immigrants to the United States. At the current rate, the population of Indian Americans is expected to double in the next 15 years. Despite these high numbers, *One Percent* notes, compared to the hostility directed at the tiny number of arrivals up to the mid twentieth century, the recent migrants have faced limited backlash. The authors write, “This stark difference in response to the Indian American presence encapsulates the transformation not just of the community but also of the United States itself.”

THE US CIVIL-RIGHTS MOVEMENT in the 1960s led to laws against discrimination in employment and housing on the basis of race, colour, gender or ethnic origin. Americans became less insular, especially as US-led wars obliged the country to take in Asian refugees, and many US soldiers returned with Asian spouses. The notion of selecting immigrants based on skills, and not race, became increasingly accepted, at least in major urban centres on the country’s coasts.

Nevertheless, Indians, and other South Asians, continue to face hurdles: discrimination, social isolation, glass ceilings and the idea that they are not suited for leadership roles. South Asian Americans’ political clout has been limited by the fact that they do not form significant voter bases in any constituency. Close to half of the South Asian adults in the United States are not US citizens, and thus cannot vote. Apart from token gestures—Barack Obama celebrating Diwali, or Donald Trump declaring “I am a big fan of Hindu”—politicians rarely court South Asians for their votes, as they do with Latinos and black people. Many South Asian Americans have responded to the challenges of assimilation and the need for empowerment by forming their own organisations: professional, political, religious, regional and linguistic interest groups, as well as labour unions, community centres and more.

South Asian immigrants taken together have a more diverse socioeconomic profile than Indian Americans. Mishra’s historical account in *Desis Divided* encompasses early migration from regions such as west Punjab or east Bengal, which would later become parts of Pakistan and Bangladesh, and the evolution of those communities in the United States. After 1965, religious minorities from Pakistan, we learn, migrated in “significantly higher” proportions than Pakistani Sunni Muslims. Since 1990, many Pakistanis and Bangladeshis have come in on “diversity visas” that are not skill-based or family-based but granted by lottery, in order to increase the number of arriv-



Desis Divided: The Political Lives of South Asian Americans
Sangay K Mishra
University of Minnesota Press
288 pages, \$27

OPPOSITE PAGE:
Between 1965 and 1980, most Indian immigrants to the United States were from Gujarat. Many Gujaratis bought businesses and assimilated quickly into suburban America.

OPPOSITE PAGE: The attacks of 11 September, 2001 were followed by racially motivated violence against some South Asian groups, such as turban-wearing Sikhs. However, these incidents did not lead to a large-scale mobilisation of South Asian Americans as a community.

als from countries whose immigrants are under-represented in the United States (such visas were discontinued for Pakistan in 2002, as a response to the militant attacks of 11 September 2001).

Mishra argues that the dominant forms of South Asian American political mobilisation ignore this broader, more diverse South Asian community and “focus only on a narrow socioeconomic elite.” He cites three major trends of political engagement among South Asian immigrants.

The first of these is contesting elections. This is exemplified by the state governors Bobby Jindal and Nikki Haley (both part of the conservative Republican Party), and involves South Asian American politicians seeking election from white-majority constituencies. This requires deracialised campaigns that do not question American racial hierarchies, downplay candidates’ South Asian identity and project them as embodiments of the “American dream.” Notably, both Jindal, who was born to a Hindu family, and Haley, who was born to a Sikh one, converted to Christianity and altered their first names, making them more palatable to white Christian Republican voters. Despite such efforts, South Asian Americans continue to be greatly under-represented in state legislatures across the country. This year, for the first time, they account for about 1 percent of the US Congress, roughly in proportion to their share of the national population.

Instead of contesting elections, many South Asian Americans have sought political leverage through what Mishra identifies as the second trend of engagement: fundraising for and donating to non-South Asian electoral candidates. The leverage they gain is often used to press for high-profile political appointments of Indian Americans in the US government. The third trend of political engagement is lobbying, which South Asians have used to pursue relatively narrow professional, political and national-interest objectives on behalf of their home countries, as with the American Association of Physicians of Indian Origin and the US-India Civil Nuclear Deal. Mishra notes that many Indian Americans greatly admire how an influential minority of American Jews mobilises for both American Jews and Israel, with organisations such as the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, which is committed to bolstering the US-Israel relationship, and the Anti-Defamation League, which fights anti-Semitism. Some Hindu Americans, inspired to similarly fortify their interests and US-India relations, have formed organisations such as the United States India Political Action Committee. These approaches to politics, Mishra believes, “end up reinforcing selective elite mobilisation, which precludes large segments from getting drawn into the political processes.”

Bobby Jindal and Nikki Haley have won elections as Republicans in conservative white-majority districts by running deracialised campaigns that downplay their South Asian identity and do not question American racial hierarchies.

After the 9/11 attacks, Mishra writes, South Asians as a group became targets “of suspicion, racial discrimination, and violent hate crimes,” creating a “pervasive sense of being an outsider.” Usually, when a diverse group is racially lumped together by others, it generates broad pan-ethnic solidarity and mobilisation within that group. Yet such mobilisation did not occur among South Asian Americans on a large scale. This, Mishra argues, is a result of the many internal divisions among them, such as those of class, religion, caste and national origin. After 9/11, for instance, rather than make common cause with other South Asians, many Hindus fretted that they were being mistaken for Muslims, and some devised strategies to broadcast their non-Muslim status. One of these was wearing bindis, which are strongly associated in the United States with Hindus. Shashi Tripathi, then the consul general of India, even reportedly suggested this strategy.

That divisions exist among South Asians is hardly news. That certain divisions can deter wider solidarity is also obvious. Yet Mishra draws attention to these factors as if he has uncovered something original, and frequently claims that they are ignored in the dominant sociological models used to study the political assimilation of immigrant communities. Mishra does break new ground in documenting some emerging and relatively unknown organisations—such as South Asian labour unions and labour-advocacy groups, as well as LGBTQ and women’s rights groups—that emphasise social justice, grassroots activism and South Asian solidarity. These focus on the “sizable segment of working-class and low-income South Asian Americans ... employed as taxi drivers, gas station attendants, construction workers, domestic workers, and in other low-paying service jobs.”

But his presumption that South Asians can be unified—built on his stated belief that they all share a certain ethnic identity—is questionable. South Asians may simply have a much weaker shared identity than Mishra believes they do. Even his key premise that South Asians were targeted post 9/11 as a group is flawed. That targeting pivot-



ed on certain external signifiers: brown skin, the wearing of hijabs or turbans, visible indications of being Muslim, Arab or Middle-Eastern, and so on, rather than South Asians in particular. If South Asian Americans did not feel targeted as a group, then can we expect them to have a unified mobilisation?

ONE PERCENT HAS ITS BLIND SPOTS TOO.

The book recognises that Indian Americans have brought concrete benefits to India, through remittances, philanthropy, lobbying on behalf of India in Washington and catalysing foreign investment to fuel India's software industry. However, a more complete accounting ought to also include the costs that large-scale emigration has had for the country, which *One Percent* ignores. It prefers instead to repeat the cliché that the "brain drain" is really a "brain bank." At times, as the book recounts

the successes of Indian Americans, it is hard to miss a whiff of triumphalism. *One Percent* relies almost exclusively on income and educational attainment as measures of success, but should we not also ask how well Indian Americans have done in producing great leaders, thinkers, historians, artists, writers, activists, musicians, lawyers and athletes? The book makes good use of census and survey data, and a quantitative survey of Indian American entrepreneurs by the authors themselves. But it also offers a few questionable assertions that are not data-driven and belong in the realm of the imponderable. For instance, it says the exit of elite upper-caste emigres from India "ensured that their economic interests were unimpaired," and that this "elite emigration lubricated the political ascendancy of India's numerically dominant lower castes, resulting in greater political sta-

bility than might have been the case if this option had not been available." The authors of *One Percent* also do not seem to recognise the diaspora's enormous political impact in India. They concede that "Indian Americans also fund ethnic nationalism—for instance, by supporting a variety of ethnic nationalist groups in India," but, oddly, they are extremely sceptical about the financial strength and impact of this support, and limit themselves to merely saying that "the long-term effects in India of ideological support from abroad could well have more pernicious consequences."

"Could well have"? According to the authors, *One Percent* "has its antecedents in a grant provided by the Government of India" through the ministry of external affairs, and its failure to address how Indian Americans are disproportionately affecting politics in In-

dia is a significant blind spot in its otherwise judicious and empirically rich analysis. The authors fail to see that the “reputational effects of the diaspora,” which they laud for having “improved perceptions of Indian technology business,” work in the political sphere to make Hindutva seem respectable. Tens of thousands of Indian Americans flocked to rock-star receptions for Prime Minister Narendra Modi in New York and Silicon Valley. Indian Americans have also disproportionately led Hindutva “scholarship” and bolstered the “Out of India” theory, which opposes the “Aryan Migration” theory and posits India as the birthplace of not just Vedic Sanskrit but also the entire Indo-European language family. They have distorted Indian history and fabricated claims about the country’s past, led attacks on allegedly “Hinduphobic” scholars in India and the West, and fuelled a range of conspiracy theories and chauvinistic activism to “defend” Hinduism. In one example, in California, Indian American groups argued for changes in school curricula on South Asian history that would have whitewashed issues such as caste discrimination and patriarchy.

Mishra’s view of ethnic nationalism among Indian Americans is much less blinkered. “The emergence of Hindu majoritarian politics in India,” he writes, “had strong reverberations in the Indian diaspora, and it was particularly pronounced in the United States,” where it generated “vocal support” for Hindu nationalism and divided Indian Americans “along ideological lines.” Mishra sees “a very deliberate strategy on the part of Hindu nationalist organizations in India to create diasporic Hindutva organizations.” Right-wing groups such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America, the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh, the Hindu Students Council, American Hindus Against Defamation and the Hindu American Foundation are now “an important cultural and political force in the Indian American community.” South Asian leftists and minorities—such as Dalits, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians—have mobilised against them through groups such as the Campaign to Stop Funding Hate, the Forum of Indian Leftists, the Co-

alition Against Genocide, South Asian Americans Leading Together, the Federation of Indian American Christian Organizations and the Indian American Muslim Council.

It is quite likely that Hindus in America, overwhelmingly from elite castes, support Modi’s party and its deeply conservative idea of India in greater proportion than even Hindus in India. Mishra suggests that the American model of multiculturalism—which strives to welcome citizens of all backgrounds into mainstream culture while still encouraging them to assert their cultural distinctiveness—encourages discrete identities tied to narrow ideas of culture, often at the expense of wider solidarities. This leads to forms of Hindu American pride that find expression in Hindu nationalist politics.

It is then curious that Indian Americans overwhelmingly vote for the Democratic Party, more so than other major immigrant groups. *One Percent* rightly attributes this to the Democrats’ “big-tent” approach towards minorities, and the party’s more liberal stance on immigration, multiculturalism and religious diversity compared to its Republican rival. Indian Americans greatly value the opportunities such policies provide for them to flourish in the United States. But *One Percent* does not explore the rank hypocrisy among those who support religious diversity and liberal multicultural politics in the United States, where they are minorities, while championing the majoritarian, socially conservative politics of the Bharatiya Janata Party and various Hindutva groups that obstruct the flourishing of minorities in India.

ONE PERCENT’S AUTHORS RECOGNISE that “Immigration, assimilation, and acculturation have profound effects on the meaning of a political community,” and that “Perhaps more than any other policy issue, immigration captures the contradictions and tensions of liberal, capitalist democracies as they simultaneously pursue policies of openness and building walls.” They cite studies that “show that immigration has had ‘very small impacts on wage inequality among natives’ in the United States and that ‘net growth of immigrant labor

has a zero to positive correlation with changes in native wages and native employment, in aggregate and by skill group.” Nevertheless, as they write in the conclusion:

Even if economists are sanguine about the aggregate effects of immigration, its impact on politics has been deeply pernicious. There is strong evidence that fears about immigration are having a significant impact on white Americans’ political identities, policy preferences, and electoral choices.

Donald Trump became US President after these two books were written, and even more disquiet now lurks in the air. Steve Bannon, who until recently was Trump’s chief strategist, echoed the Asiatic Exclusion League of over a century ago when, back in 2015, he complained in a radio conversation with Trump that “two-thirds or three-quarters of the CEOs in Silicon Valley are from South Asia or from Asia,” implying that there were too many of them. This was a wild overestimate—the proportion is actually 14 percent. Bannon followed that by saying “a country is more than an economy,” and that “we’re a civic society”—suggesting that Asians are inimical to the latter. The prevalence of hate crimes against various Asian immigrant groups has risen since Trump’s election. There are plans to restrict the current regime of legal immigration for both close family members of immigrants as well as skilled workers. Any jolts to the US labour market in the near future, whether due to globalisation or technological advancement, will likely only fuel more xenophobia and restrictive immigration policies.

The rise of Indian Americans is a rare phenomenon in the history of global migration. But, like any group, they, and South Asians more broadly, have their fair share of human follies and pathologies. They would do well to abandon the myth of the model minority, and to distance themselves from leaders who uphold an oppressive unity. As Mishra’s account shows, diversity and dissent are thriving among South Asian Americans. ■