

INTERVIEW AUTHORS

## 'More liberal than all other Asian Americans'



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DECEMBER 11, 2016 00:15 IST

UPDATED: DECEMBER 11, 2016 00:39 IST

### Devesh Kapur and Sanjoy Chakravorty discuss their new book on Indian Americans — the community's identity, growing influence in American politics, and social attitudes

*Indian Americans, numbering over three million, make up about 1 per cent of the American population. The Other One Percent: Indians in America (Oxford University Press) is arguably the first comprehensive and data-driven account of the "selection, assimilation, and entrepreneurship" of Indians in America. Authors Sanjoy Chakravorty and Devesh Kapur explain the contours of the study, the political and social attitudes of Indian Americans and what their future could be in their host country. Kapur spoke first and Chakravorty supplemented the responses with written inputs. Kapur is Director, Centre for the Advanced Study of India at University of Pennsylvania, and Chakravorty is Professor of Geography at Temple University. The third co-author, Nirvikar Singh, is Professor of Economics at University of California, Santa Cruz.*

#### Why is the book titled the 'Other' One Percent?

It's a question we get asked quite often by our colleagues in India. In a way it is a play on a big trope in American popular culture, which is inequality. There are books and documentaries and social movements that refer to it. It is a play on that title. At one level it is a factual thing, because Indian Americans are one per cent of the total population of America. The other point is that, if you take all Indians anywhere in the world, those in America are richest in that population. This it not to be taken literally, but in a figurative sense. They are the tail end of the income distribution of global Indians. They are the richest. To top it all, they are also the most well-to-do immigrant or ethnic group in America.

### **Do they have an identity as Indians in America? Or are they Telugus and Tamils, Brahmin and Dalit in America?**

Identity is contextual. If you look at surveys and see how they identify themselves, one thing that they rarely do is to call themselves South Asians. Very few Hispanics also identify themselves as such. Country of origin is the most used self-identification. So, a majority of Indian Americans identify themselves as Indians in such surveys. Of course, given that India is a heterogeneous country, you could expect Indian Americans to be heterogeneous. Till the 1990s, if you take Hindi out, Gujarati and Punjabi speakers were the biggest groups. But Telugu speakers are the largest community after Hindi speakers now, and there has also been a rapid growth of Tamil speakers. These groups have the Maratha Sangham, Telugu Association, etc. So that is about a cultural identity, it is not a political identity. On a day-to-day basis, as far as the people they associate with and the food they eat and the culture they consume are concerned, it is very likely that these cultural identities dominate, at least in the first generation. It is also possible to maintain these, to some extent, because our language communities tend to live in separate places – Gujaratis in New Jersey and Illinois, Punjabis in California and New York. But when it comes to a question of India, these communities tend to coalesce around the notion of India. Like it happened during the nuclear deal, they would call the Senators, the Governor, etc. Indians are very good at holding multiple identities.

But your identity is not entirely decided by who you think you are; it is also about who others think you are. For most Americans you are Indian. It is said that Italian as a national identity emerged in the U.S. Italians came here as Sicilians or Venetians. Their regional identity was strong. But here it changed. They became Italian because everyone said so and treated them as Italians. Very similar processes are at work for Indians too. And it has a feedback effect – one begins to see oneself through the eyes of others.

### **Talking of context, religion is another identity that a majority of Indians might share in America. Is that true?**

There is no precise way to gauge that because of the fact that the U.S. census has not asked questions about religious identity from around 1950. Other surveys, such as some by Pew [Research Center], have done so, but not the census. But you can make some reasonable statements about the likelihood. To the extent that higher education has been very important as a route for Indians to come to the U.S., the social groups that are highly represented in higher education in India are more likely to have arrived in the U.S. Some religious and social groups are under-represented in India while some others are over-represented. Upper castes, Christians, Jains are over-represented relative to their share in the population while Muslims and many caste groups are under-represented.

### **So it is safe to assume that the significant majority of Indians are Hindu upper castes?**

Yes. Because the upper castes had better access to higher education.

### **This election season had a particular context, one that demanded all Americans to think about their identity. A group of Indians defined themselves as Hindus against Islamist terrorism and decided to support Donald Trump. How appealing was that to Indian Americans in voting?**

A distinct minority only may have been swayed by it. Of all Asian Americans, Indian Americans were the least likely to support Trump. If you compare with Chinese Americans or Vietnamese Americans, the degree of dislike for Trump was the highest among Indian Americans. There was a small group that strongly liked him, but the intensity of dislike was much higher among the rest. In fact, there is a new survey-based report out recently that says [Hillary] Clinton beat Trump 75-to-19 per cent among Asian Americans – the widest ever margin in a presidential election. We don't have the

precise data on Indian Americans yet, but it is very possible that they supported Clinton by margins similar to [Barack] Obama, which was over 80 per cent.

**It looks like questions of identity will continue to dominate American politics and life for some time to come.**

**Would Indian Americans be tempted to accept the notion that this is a Christian country at war with Islam?**

Of Asian Americans, Indians were the least likely to say that Muslims should not enter this country. Even on an issue such as affirmative action, even though we expected the upper caste-dominated Indian community to be against it, that was not the case. We think that there are a lot of misconceptions about Indian Americans. Partly these misconceptions, as it was the case with Indians for Trump, are due to the fact that the squeaking wheel gets the grease. The guy who screams and shouts. Everyone wanted to know about Hindus for Trump while nobody wanted to know about the Indians voting for Democrats. Everyone gets the eyeballs with the oddball story. The ordinary person's viewpoints are rarely taken into account.

**The 1 per cent of the population now also has 1 per cent representation in the U.S. Congress, with five Indian American members and the first Senator. Do you think the Indian American community's influence in the country's politics will continue to grow?**

Moderately, for sure, maybe more. By and large, if you look at the trends, there are far fewer Indian American Republicans than you would have expected and the main reason for that is religion. The only Indian American Republicans of consequence are the ones who either converted to Christianity or were already Christians. There is no way you can stand for governor in a southern American state and win if you are not a Christian. That essentially means that one party becomes your only avenue. That itself is a limiting factor. And race, of course, and the fact that the Republican party is increasingly identified with anti-immigrant positions.

Moreover, Indian Americans are concentrated in some locations: California and the north-east. These are already Democratic States. So if you are heavily Democrat-oriented in a Democratic State, the marginal impact is limited. So, as voters their impact is modest. Because they are articulate and well-educated, they have more influence in staffing in the U.S. Congress and in a whole range of offices in Washington. Electoral office, at least in the foreseeable future, as long as this polarisation continues, may have some natural limits. But there are reasons to think that their political impact may increase, and that is mainly because large cohorts of the second generation, the children of Indian immigrants are beginning to come of age. The second generation is very, very young. Five out of six are less than 25 years old. When these youngsters begin to become politically active, they will do so in an American framework, unlike many Indian-born immigrants who still connect more strongly to politics in India. It is quite possible that we will see more Indian American names and faces in mainstream American politics relatively soon, if not immediately.

**What is the Indian Americans' conception of India?**

The media in Delhi and the intellectuals in general are obsessed with the notion that Indian Americans are big supporters of Hindutva. There is a practical question here. Now, one of the largest Indian American groups is Telugu. What is the kind of support for the BJP in Andhra Pradesh? Very little. The BJP is pretty weak in the entire south. The largest numbers of Indians coming now are coming from south India. So we cannot make that correlation easily. Is there a segment that is a strong supporter of the BJP? Yes. Is it a majority view? Unequivocally no. Is there a larger group that supports this particular Prime Minister? Yes. It would be very simplistic to confuse the support for an individual with support for an ideology. Unfortunately we tend to make these equations. It is possible that if the BJP had a leader who did not have the charisma and media management ability than this particular Prime Minister has, it would have only a fraction of the support it currently has. Therefore, we should not mistake the support for an individual for the support for a deeper ideology necessarily. The second generation, of course, does not have much interest in Indian politics.

**What does the book say about the social attitudes of Indian Americans?**

On almost all issues they are more liberal than all other Asian Americans (compared to, say, Chinese Americans or Vietnamese Americans) and definitely more liberal than the Indians in India. India is a socially conservative place. One area in which Indian Americans are less liberal in comparison with other Asian Americans is in their attitude towards gays. It is below the average. But on all other questions – affirmative action, giving a pathway to citizenship for illegal immigrants, attitude towards Muslims – they are more liberal than other Asians. One thing that stands out, which we think can be called a part of social attitudes, is that they have the lowest rate of divorce. That means they tend to have two incomes per family, and children grow up in two parent households. What it does is, it gives you a household income advantage, which means that your children get better education, which gives you a further advantage that your life's chances are better. So you find a peculiar link between a social conservative trait and an economic advantage.

### What is their attitude on religion?

In this book we don't dwell much on this question because the U.S. census does not have data on that. Broadly speaking, anecdotally, Sikhs are very attached to their gurudwaras and Indian Muslims go to the mosques where other South Asians go, and not where Middle Eastern Muslims go.

### Do they become more religious being here?

There is no evidence to suggest that. You will have to really differentiate that by age and by the cohort of when you came. If you have come at an early stage, when you are the only person from India around, then the pressure is more

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very tight to carry that identity. Older cohorts tended to be more religious, but that may be true here, in America and Europe. That is not part of the book, only a conjecture. We suspect it is not in India. If you ask a 20-year-old IT engineer in Hyderabad, his view will be vastly different from his

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### it about Indian Americans that you think stands out in this book?


nts we have already mentioned, but an important one we haven't. That is, the extent of the brain you take the areas of higher education, despite all the rhetorical flourishes about engaging the y severely underleveraged. There are 95,000 Indians with PhDs in the U.S. India produces around ar. Assuming that 10 per cent of that is of the quality that is produced here, we are talking about some ways, India has gifted the U.S. half a century worth of high-quality human capital. Yet, the dia, all the rules and regulations, ensures that instead of attracting as many of them back, keep S., even with an Indian passport you can work in defence research. Can you imagine this happening . parties in Indian are complicit. None of them has the vision to leverage the potential of the

gher levels of human capital than India. Therefore, when you have less of a desirable asset, India way to attract that asset, but the opposite is happening. While the U.S. continues to get the best e, in India we treat outsiders as threats even though our need is higher. It is the basic openness that RDO [Defence Research and Development Organisation] allow someone with an American h it? The cost of not being open is so high, but we are more worried about the potential risks en.

### 3. system of attracting the best and the brightest will come under strain under Trump?

Some of them will continue. For instance, those who come for research under STEM. Whereas the IT workers who come through Indian firms as opposed to those hired by American companies may face new challenges. The whole business model of Indian companies may come under pressure. By the way, some of this was going to happen anyway, because of artificial intelligence and other technological advancements. But predicting the future is a risky game, especially when there is a new President who takes pride in being unpredictable. There are many interests at work here – Wall Street, the

innovation economy, new technologies, the declining economy of deindustrialisation, race, identity – and one suspects that all of them will have wins and losses in the new regime.

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