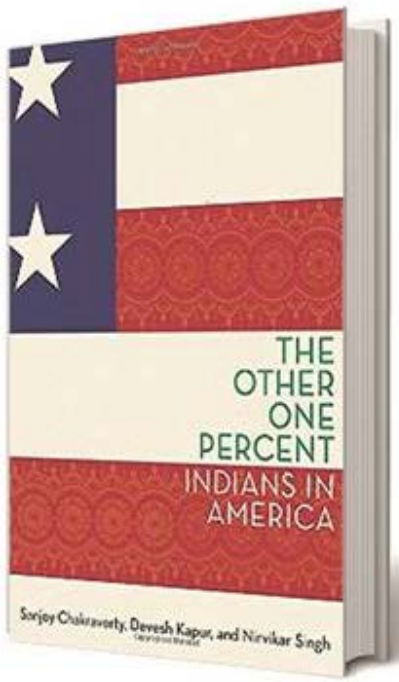
All Come to Look for America

A fact-rich and data-driven study breaks a few myths and unearths new insights about Indians in the US.

Written by **Patrick French** | Published:December 10, 2016 12:10 am



The Other One Percent: Indians in America

Name: The Other One Percent: Indians in America

Author: Sanjoy Chakravorty, Devesh Kapur and Nirvikar Singh

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The mass migrations of the last century or so have had a profound effect on human society, as alien cultures have had to learn to adapt quickly to living alongside one another. People from India have for generations shifted around the world: across the Indian Ocean and to East Asia for trade, to the Caribbean and beyond as indentured labour, and to Europe, Canada and the Gulf in search of work and opportunities. More recent Indian migrants to the United States have often been strikingly successful, in part because they usually started out from an advantageous position back home.

Indians in America exist in several stereotypical forms: techies from Silicon Valley in California; Apu, who runs a convenience store in The Simpsons; deracinated Hindu zealots who, according to Martha C. Nussbaum's unproven assertion in 2003, were "highly significant in the funding of the Gujarat violence." Ashis Nandy has even written: "Among NRIs in the First World, I shall not be surprised if some survey finds that the support base of Hindu nationalism is more than 90 per cent." One of the lessons from Sanjoy Chakravorty, Devesh Kapur and Nirvikar Singh's fact-rich and data-driven book The Other One Percent: Indians in America is that Indian Americans, aside from being highly educated, are mainly Democrats. In 2008, over 90 per cent of them voted for Barack Obama. A Pew survey in 2012 found that "Indian Americans are the most Democratic-leaning of the six US Asian groups." So goodbye to a much-repeated stereotype, and to the disproportionate attention lavished on Donald Trump's small number of Indian-origin supporters.

The authors note at the start that "unlike much writing on Indian Americans in the humanities traditions, we do not focus on the discourse centred on race and identity." Their interests are in the history of Indian immigration to the US, which took off in 1965 and accelerated in the mid-1990s; the "selection" of these migrants, who usually had strong professional attainments; the conspicuous regional diversity of their origins in India and settlement in America; the discrimination and success that accompanied assimilation; some explanations for entrepreneurship; and the consequences for India of the shifting of the "other one per cent".

The earliest arrivals in the United States at the end of the 19th Century were Punjabi farmers, and Bengali Muslim stokers who jumped ship from British merchant vessels and married African-American, Creole and Puerto Rican women. There were at the time so few Indians in America that immigration officers were apt to be confused, with the 1910 census noting that "pure-blood Hindus belong ethnically to the Caucasian or white race." By the early 1920s, anti-immigrant sentiment was booming and settlement became more difficult, but the liberalisation of US immigration law in the 1960s led to skilled Indian professionals and students arriving.

Nearly half of what the authors call the "early movers" had or would obtain graduate degrees, many in medicine. This pattern continued, and explains the rise of Indian Americans to become "the highest-educated and highest-

earning group, immigrant or native, in the United States." Family size and stability were also critical to their financial success, compared to other social groups. It is no surprise to learn that back in India, over 90 per cent of migrants came from high castes or what are termed here "dominant castes (like Patels in Gujarat and Kapu and Kamma in Andhra Pradesh)."

The Other One Percent emphasises that the "twice born" were also "thrice selected" — first in India, second by US immigration practice, and third by educational institutions and labour markets, where their cultural capital and English-language skills boosted their chances over other immigrants. This is not to suggest their journey was ever easy. Despite being born in New York state, Miss America 2014, Nina Davuluri, had to endure "a barrage of racist comments suggesting she was a foreigner, Miss 7-Eleven, an Arab, and even a terrorist with ties to Al Qaeda." In India, it was suggested that Davuluri was too dark to make a plausible beauty queen.

So much of what we know about people of Indian origin in America is anecdotal — obtained from films, friends, novels, conversations, media-driven "success" stories from the worlds of business, politics, technology and even comedy — that it is a relief to read a definitive interdisciplinary study drawing on data that involve a significant number of people. We learn about a complex group of over two million individuals who are becoming increasingly visible and influential in American public life.

During the course of their research, Chakravorty, Kapur and Singh have turned up countless new nuggets of information. Let me share just one with you: 22 per cent of US Pakistanis and roughly 40 per cent of US Bangladeshis identify as Indian on the census form. "That is, they were born in Bangladesh or Pakistan, but identified themselves as Indians by race (even when the census allowed them to identify themselves as Bangladeshi or Pakistani by race)." Most of these people were born after Independence and Partition in 1947, which suggests that claiming an Indian identity can make life easier if you are a South Asian in the United States, and that the cross-border or civilisational outreach practised by the current Indian government to historic neighbours from the subcontinent has much to recommend it.

What is likely to happen next? By 2030, the "economically active second-generation cohort" assessed here will have more than doubled in size. But these younger Indian Americans may lose a transnational attachment to their ancestral homeland, since "identity attrition might reduce the officially recorded numbers as future generations gradually fuse into an ever-evolving American mainstream." Ironically, the United States itself now bears a passing resemblance to the India of their grandparents' time: it has shocking levels of inequality, an angry political chasm, a proto-dynasty in the ascendant, and strident nationalists making demands for economic protectionism. So the world keeps on turning, and civilisations rise and fall.

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