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Author: Indian expatriates in 2 worlds

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Barrington resident Sunil Bhatia has written a book about Indian professionals who immigrated to this country to take high-paying jobs.

Providence Journal / Kris Craig

The immigration bill that President Lyndon Johnson signed into law 43 years ago drastically changed the criteria for admission to this country.

It junked a system, based on race, that discouraged immigration from non-WASP nations, and substituted a system based on family ties and merit that opened the door to people from eastern and southern Europe and the Third World.

Suddenly, it was possible for immigrants from countries other than England and Germany to come here and take lucrative jobs in medicine, science and industry.

Many of the newcomers came from India. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, a sizable number of south Asians settled in southeastern Connecticut, creating small outposts of the Indian diaspora in Groton, Ledyard, Norwich, Norwalk, Waterford, New London, East Lyme and Old Lyme.

The 1950 census counted 333 Indian-born people in Connecticut. By 2000, there were 15,108 in Connecticut and 1,423 in Rhode Island, among them, the parents of Jhumpa Lahiri, who won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction that year. Lahiri's parents live in South Kingstown. In *American Karma*, a scholarly book published by New York University Press, Barrington resident Sunil Bhatia profiles this expatriate community, describing the architects, professors, teachers, school counselors, social workers, professors and physicians who made new lives for themselves in this country following passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965.

Although *American Karma* focuses on the Indian community in southeastern Connecticut, Bhatia says, "it is important to mention that the Indians in southeastern Connecticut are not very different from Indians in other middle-class communities across America."

During the 1980s and 1990s, he says, the highly educated Indians who came to the United States acquired "model minority status," becoming a kind of multicultural success story.

To former Senators Phil Gramm and Jesse Helms, they were living proof that people with thick accents and dark skin could get ahead in this country, provided they were well-educated and worked hard. "Indian Americans represent the best and brightest the United States has to offer," Helms said, addressing the Indian American Forum for Political Education in 1997. "You can go to the finest hospitals, you can go to the universities, you can go into business and there they are, people from India."

But the picture Bhatia paints isn't entirely positive.

American Karma details the often painful compromises that many highly educated Indian professionals made in their daily lives, compromises that Bhatia believes have had a profound impact on their identities.

"They felt that they were highly valued at work. They had made a mark for themselves. They had succeeded," Bhatia says.

Outside work, the situation was different.

"Socially, there was a sense that they did not really belong."

American Karma offers examples: Priya, a specialist in infectious diseases who teaches at a Connecticut university, began wearing a black western-style dress and scarf after her colleagues' polite questions about India made her feel like a foreigner.

Rohan changed his daughter Sheetal's lunch menu after another student in her elementary school said the chutney sandwich Sheetal brought to school one day smelled bad.

The people quoted in *American Karma* are identified by pseudonyms; the organizations for which they work aren't named. When Bhatia conducted the interviews for the book, he signed a consent form that legally bound him not to reveal any identifying information. But there are verifiable instances of first-generation Indian immigrants facing prejudice in this country. One was reported in this newspaper in 1997, when someone put threatening notes in the mailbox belonging to Tia Lahiri, Jhumpa Lahiri's mother, at South Road Elementary School in South Kingstown, where she was an assistant teacher and where she and her husband Amar still live.

The notes called her ugly names and told her to “go back to India.” In a letter to the editor, she characterized them as racist: “I see no difference between ‘hate’ and ‘racist’ mail.”

Tia Lahiri may have been unusual. But Bhatia says Indian immigrants who are the targets of racism often try to rationalize the experience, attributing the prejudice to human nature and emphasizing their common humanity with people born in the United States.

“One way of describing this universal humanity between Americans and Indians is to invoke the notion of being a citizen of the world,” Bhatia writes in *American Karma*.

“The participants’ appeal to human nature was another strategic tactic,” he writes.

“These are the Indians who came in the ’60s and early ’70s,” Bhatia says in an interview. “They benefited quite a bit through the economic gains of this country, through all the progress” they made by coming to the United States.

“They feel, yes, they have acquired success — and they are very proud about that — by hard work, by labor. But they also have lost out on what has happened back home,” where they have left behind their friends, uncles, aunts and parents, and missed birthdays, Bhatia said.

“It’s very hard for them as time goes by.”

Nearly 40 first-generation Indian immigrants were interviewed for *American Karma*. Most of them lived in East Lyme, Conn., and came from dual-income families with household incomes between \$65,000 and \$200,000 a year.

Despite their economic and professional success, most haven’t completely assimilated, Bhatia says in *American Karma*. Made to feel different by their skin color and accents, Bhatia says, they have developed “hybrid” identities, distinct from upper-middle-class white Americans, with part of themselves longing for home.

Bhatia is a developmental psychologist who teaches at Connecticut College in New London, Conn. He and his wife, Anjali Ram, an associate professor of global communications and mass media at Roger Williams University, moved to Barrington a year ago, splitting their commute and enrolling their 5-year-old twins, Amit and Anusha, in the Barrington public schools.

Showing up casually dressed for an interview at the Starbucks on Thayer Street, in Providence, Bhatia, 41, looks more like a college student than a professor with a long list of scholarly papers.

Bhatia’s ethnicity — he came to this country from India 19 years ago — gave him “insider” status in the Indian community, making it easy for him to gain access to the people he interviewed.

Partly as a result of the interviews, Bhatia developed extensive contacts in the Indian community. Over the past year, he has parlayed some of those contacts into a local support committee at Connecticut College for Friends of Shelter Associates, a non-governmental organization in India that is raising money for toilets in slums.

Last year, the Friends of Shelter Associates chapter at Connecticut College raised more than \$30,000 for toilets in Bhatia’s home city of Pune and surrounding areas. Another local support committee, which was organized after Bhatia approached the South Asian Students Association at Brown University, raised \$12,000 at a February fundraiser, Bhatia said.

One member of the Shelter Associates steering committee at Connecticut College, Barun Basu, is in many respects characteristic of the highly successful Indian immigrants Bhatia profiles in American Karma.

Basu designed the Hindu temple in Middletown, Conn., where he, Bhatia and other members of the Indian community worship. He was 21 years old when he came to this country in 1967 to earn a master's degree in architecture at the University of California at Berkeley.

Now 65, he has a grown son and daughter and his own architecture company, Barun Basu Associates in New London.

Basu said of Bhatia's book, "I know portions of it. I think he's very accurate."

The first-generation Indians who achieved financial and professional success here do feel differently from mainstream Americans, he said.

"There is that kind of distance still," Basu said. "But, you know, it's increasingly breaking down because of our kids inter-marrying Americans, becoming more American themselves."

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