

Coming of Age for the Indian American Community

Text and photographs by LISETTE B. POOLE

In the northern California town of Yuba City, known to some as “little India,” citizens are looking forward to a third gurdwara.

In a building in Fremont, at the gateway to Silicon Valley, shuttles fly over nets and sneakers squeak as badminton players bound over the courts. Meanwhile, on a U.S. aircraft carrier, halfway around the world, naval aviators practice yoga on deck.

From the sizzle of the tandoori platter and the rhythmic drum beats of the bhangra dance, to hospitals, technology corporations and digital media studios, the Indian American presence has become a lively and colorful part of northern Californians’ daily life.

Sociologists attribute the new attitudes to the growing influence of the established Indian American community, their 20-something offspring, and enterprising young couples drawn to the area by the dotcom industry. Critics argue there is much flaunting of wealth, excessive focus on achievement and ambiguous feelings about relations between both countries. On the one hand there is a residue of bitterness over the outsourcing of American jobs to India, but on the other hand there is an appreciation and desire to learn more about the community’s traditions, cultures and lifestyles. The Indian American community in Northern California is estimated at 200,000.

The wish to feel understood,

and not just accepted as a curiosity, is a core need expressed by many minorities in California, including Indian Americans. In Yuba City alone they constitute almost 7 percent of the population of 36,758—the second largest minority after the Mexican community.

Indian Americans as well as immigrants from Pakistan, Afghanistan and the Middle East continue efforts to invite the mainstream into their communities and houses of worship to increase understanding. Two notable successes are badminton and yoga. Three badminton facilities started up in the San Francisco Bay Area over the past year. Some high schools are also emphasizing the sport. United Badminton Club of Fremont opened in March 2005, and was quickly followed by Smash City in Milpitas and Golden Gate Badminton Club in Menlo Park, all within a 16-kilometer radius, says Abi Bautista, program director at United Badminton Club.

“I was thrilled a few months ago when I discovered this place through some friends,” says Arshad Syed. “I have not played it in 30 years because there was no one to play with, nor was there a proper, professionally designed facility.” Syed came to California in 1974 and earned his MBA degree from California State University in Sonoma. Syed, in his mid-50s, says he plays badminton to stay in shape, and “for the love of the

art.” He believes the growing Indian, Afghan, Pakistani and Hong Kong-Chinese communities in the area are driving the sport’s appeal. Even as badminton makes inroads, yoga is more popular than ever at local gyms. Tapes are selling in grocery stores. TV channels, such as the Public Broadcasting Service, show “Sit-and-be-Fit” programs to help at-home sen-



Arshad Syed is thrilled to find a place to play badminton again.

iors maintain muscle flexibility.

Last August, the *Los Angeles Times*, ABC television network and other media carried a story about sailors and soldiers eager to improve their stamina, flexibility and mental focus through yoga. The exercises are catching on in the military, both for the fit and the hundreds recovering from injuries. The stories were sparked by *Fit Yoga*, America’s second largest yoga magazine, with a cir-

ulation of 100,000, after it featured a photo of two naval aviators in full combat gear in the “warrior” pose aboard an aircraft carrier. “War is tragedy...” wrote Editor-in-Chief Rita Trieger, adding that she was glad yoga has helped soldiers find a little solace. She says the pictures were sent to her by e-mail by a naval aviator, Lieutenant Jason Payne.

Business generated by yoga and badminton is a credit to Asian Americans. Companies owned by them generated more than \$326 billion in nationwide revenue in 2002 and the number of firms led by this group grew 24 percent between 1997 and 2002, according to a Census report released in May 2006.

Meanwhile, in community and campus organizations young Indian Americans and other South Asian youths draw on their ethnic traditions and resourcefulness to create a vibrant subculture. Some of the Bay Area’s most happening clubs host bhangra parties and events where young South Asians congregate to dance to a mix of music—rap, reggae, techno and other popular styles, including Hindi film music.

Young women sporting nose rings and *dupattas* along with slinky club wear, and young men decked out in Abercrombie & Fitch gear move gracefully on

Editor’s note:

This is the second of a two-part series on Indian Americans in the San Francisco Bay Area.



Above: Dr. Bina Erasmus (seated) and daughter Shifali at their home in Fremont. Dr. Erasmus says the younger generation can resolve its identity crisis when they realize that their Indian heritage is as important as their American identity. Below: Ameena Saeed, adjunct professor of social sciences at Chabot College, Hayward.

the crowded dance floors without attracting particular attention. They are part of the party scene.

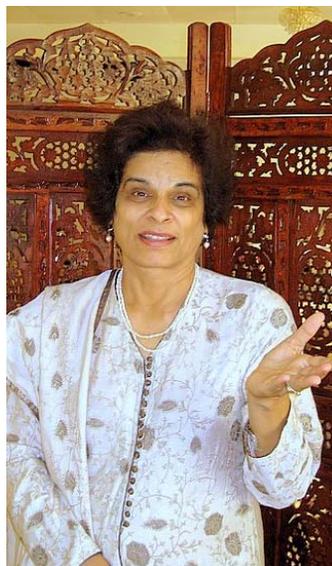
“The world of the second-generation Indian American youth is in a process of westernization, diluting a 5,000-year-old civilization, culture and language,” says Ameena Saeed, adjunct professor of social sciences at Chabot College, in

Hayward, California. “There is a synthesizing of cultures. But they also have to manage the contradictions of gender roles and handle their ‘model minority’ status in a society that is just beginning to see that everyone cannot be categorized in terms of black or white.

“Among the second generation there are many who are embarrassed by the wealth of their parents. When a friend picked up her son from college in her newly acquired Jaguar, he would not speak to her for days because he said he felt badly in front of his college peers,” says Saeed. “At the same time that Indian Americans are a minority that is willing to be part of the system they are also an airtight group. They depend on each other in financial networking and deals, they have major stakes in the hotel business, they are entering the diamond business.” She adds that many in the second generation may not share the ambitions of their parents in the service professions.

For example, Saeed, a Gujarat native, came to the United States with her husband, a university professor. Their daughter, Mariam, a student at San Francisco State University, is studying liberal arts and drama.

“It is hard being bicultural,” says Shifali Erasmus, studying broadcasting and public rela-



tions at San Jose State University. “In the Indian tradition, I grew up learning that I am part of a greater whole. So, to some, that creates internal conflict when one has individual wants but has to think of balancing those with the needs of everyone else. At the same time I feel lucky to be part of the American experience.”

Erasmus is the daughter of Bina and Desmond Erasmus, a

Dr. Steven C. Fong and Sheila Lad at Dr. Fong’s clinic. Gujarat-born Lad is one of the growing number of Indian American women in dentistry.



gynecologist and a neurosurgeon who came from India in 1967 to continue their medical education. They settled in Fremont. Their older daughter, Supna, is also a physician.

Looking back on the past 15 years, Dr. Bina Erasmus says that just as the community is coming of age, its younger generation will find its way out of the identity turmoil when they realize that their Indian heritage is as important as their American identity. “That would be healthy,” she says. “It will give them a sense of balance and an inner peace.”

Some Indian Americans have dealt with the internal collision by volunteering in public organizations, hospitals, libraries, schools and senior centers.

Sheila Lad, born in Bilimora, Gujarat, is a registered dental assistant at Dr. Steven C. Fong’s clinic. She says community work is gratifying and uplifting to the spirit. “It just makes you feel good inside. In the Indian culture it is traditional to give back; by filling the needs of others you do not focus on yourself,” she says. Lad is one of the growing number of Indian-American women in dentistry. The American Dental Association is encouraging underrepresented communities to join the profession to reflect the growing diversity of the American population.

Nationwide the Indian American community’s communication network has expanded. In the last couple of years they have added five weekend television shows, including the popular channel TV Asia, and the recently launched *Nirvana Woman* magazine to several established weekly newspapers. It helps them stay in touch with news from India while sharing developments in other Indian communities across the United States. 4

Lisette B. Poole is a freelance journalist who lectures at California State University, East Bay.

Please share your views on this article by writing to editorspan@state.gov

U.S. Immigrants Support Economies in Home Countries

By ELIZABETH KELLEHER

Money sent home by immigrants in the United States reduces poverty in developing countries and supplements government foreign aid.

The countries receiving the largest shares of money sent from the United States are India, Mexico, the Philippines, Guatemala and El Salvador. China, Vietnam, Colombia and Brazil also receive significant amounts.

According to Sumitra Chowdhury, an economic analyst at India's Embassy in Washington, in 2005 India received \$32 billion in remittances from its citizens living all over the world. There is no breakdown for how much of that came from the United States, but "the highest number of Indians abroad are in the USA," she said.

Approximately 34 million foreign-born people live in the United States; they represent 12 percent of the population—the largest share since the 1920s. According to Manuel Orozco of the research group Inter-American Dialogue, 70 percent of these people send money home.

Estimates of the value of such remittances vary, but even the lowest figure for 2004—\$30 billion, reported by the Bureau of Economic Analysis—is an amount 1.5 times larger than U.S. government foreign aid for that year.

The Hudson Institute estimates \$47 billion a year in remittances and says its figure is higher because it includes person-to-person transfers in addition to bank and wire transfers. The Inter-American Dialogue puts the amount at \$60 billion.

Whatever the total, experts agree that remittances have surged in recent years. The Bureau of Economic Analysis reports that remittances from the United States more than doubled from 1994 to 2004.

The personal stories

There are two types of remittances: money sent to family to meet basic needs; and collective remittances, which pool immigrants' money for larger projects in their hometowns.

Working men send the largest share of the money to their families. On a sunny April afternoon at the Culmore Shopping Center in Falls Church, Virginia, the phenomenon was in evidence. Pickup trucks dropped off day laborers who live nearby, and several men went in and out of a travel agency that wires money.

José, a 28-year-old road worker, says he sends \$100 to \$200 to his six brothers in Guatemala when they call and ask. One difficulty, he said, is that when it rains he has no work and not much money left to send.

Carlos, 33, who has been in the United States for 15 years and has a regular job in an auto body shop, wires \$200 a week to Honduras to help with the expenses of his grandmother, sister and niece.

Some migrants in the United States organize "hometown associations" to collect money for large projects. They hold parties at which guests donate toward the purchase of an ambulance or the building of a school.

In the early 1980s in California, five hometown associations of



Hector Morales and his mother, Alfonsa, at a Popular Cash Express counter in Los Angeles, hand money to Eteldina Romero to send to Mexico.

immigrants from Zacateca, Mexico, formed the Zacatecan Federation. By 2000, the group was sending \$1 million a year home and had convinced municipal, state and federal governments in Mexico to match its donations.

"If you go to Zacateca, you see poor communities completely converted—you see hospitals, clinics, roads and water wells," says Efrain Jimenez, vice president of the federation.

Competition from banks

Jeffrey Passel, a demographer for the Pew Hispanic Center, says, "A significant share of the increase [in remittances] is due to better data." More often now, money is sent electronically by national banks and is easier to track.

Worldwide, remittance flows surged in the last decade. The International Monetary Fund's balance-of-payments data show the value of remittances to the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia at near 4 percent of their gross domestic products (GDPs).

The Federal Reserve, the U.S. central bank, now allows banks to use an automated clearinghouse to transfer money to Mexico and provides marketing material advertising the program.

The Federal Reserve says 11 percent of U.S. families do not have checking (current) accounts. James Maloney, chairman of Mitchell Bank, a small bank in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, says he hopes immigrants, who typically operate in a cash-only economy but who are now walking in his bank's door to transfer money, will eventually enter the "financial mainstream." 4

Elizabeth Kelleher is a USINFO staff writer.