

July 4, 2004

Of Madras Men and Boston Brahmins

Every year on July 4, the American Independence Day, thousands of immigrants to America become citizens at a naturalization ceremonies held nationwide. For many, it is the culmination of a process that would have begun more than a decade ago when they would have come to this country starry-eyed and barely solvent. They would have studied and worked their way through school and college, secured their green card and permanent residency, and finally become eligible for citizenship.

There will be hundreds of Indian immigrants who will take the oath today. A typical example is Manabendra Changakakoti, a Tucson, Arizona resident who says his journey to American citizenship "began the day my parents sold their house in northeastern India and gave me \$4,655 to begin graduate studies in the United States." A local town planner, Changakakoti writes in the Tucson Citizen that although the US has lost some of the luster as a near-perfect nation, his commitment to become an American citizen has not faltered because of the country's fundamental values.

While Changakakoti may be driven by noble ideals, for many others, obtaining American citizenship is merely aimed at securing a better economic foothold. For still others, it is just a way of easing travel travails, since an American passport makes international passage easy (although in parts of the world, it could now become an invitation to trouble). Of course, there are many Indians who are fiercely proud of their nationality and cling passionately to their Indian citizenship decades after coming here, but they remain exceptions. For most, it is green card from the get-go.

The first full-blooded Indian to have arrived in the United States is widely believed to be someone dubbed the "Madras Man," who sailed to the US sometime in the late 1780s (although recent studies show some Indian-Irish mixes came as early as 1680). It was the fledgling years of independent America. While it is often said in jest that Indo-U.S history, or for that

American and Indian history, might have been different if Christopher Columbus had got his bearings right, there was another event around this time that could also have changed the course of history.

Some years before the Madras Man was meandering around Massachusetts – he was seen in a town called Salem, of the witch hunt fame; spelt the same as the Tamil Nadu town – George Washington and the French Fleet were sticking it into Lord Cornwallis at the Battle of Yorktown. A defeated Cornwallis repaired to London, and after rest and recuperation, he was sent to India, where he defeated Tippu Sultan in the Battle of Srirangapatnam. Alas and alack, Tippu did not have a line open with Washington and the Founding Fathers of America (the French rebuffed him), but for which India and U.S might have become "natural allies" much earlier.

Decades later, the writer Oliver Wendell Holmes coined the term "Boston Brahmins" to describe blue-blooded New Englanders who claim hereditary or cultural descent from White Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPs). The exalted status of these "Brahmins" – like in India – was captured in a doggerel which went: So this is good old Boston/ The home of the bean and the cod/ Where the Lowells talk only to the Cabots/ And the Cabots talk only to God. (Desk: in italics please)

Today, the Boston Brahmins are center stage. Bush and Kerry, both WASPs, qualify for the tag. As for the Brahmins from Bharat who have acquired citizenship in droves, they have come a long way, but they have even further to go.
