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Young India, Old USA

The Great Indian Demography

What's common between Manvendra Singh, Sachin Pilot, Milind Deora and Jyotiraditya Scindia aside from the fact that they are all young Indian Members of Parliament and sons of lawmaker politicians? All of them studied and lived in the United States at some point. Manavendra Singh, a sometime journalist and son of former minister Jaswant Singh, is a graduate of the liberal arts Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts. Sachin, son of the late Rajesh Pilot, has a business degree from Wharton. Milind Deora, whose father Murli Deora is a Rajya Sabha member, is a business graduate of Boston University. And Jyotiraditya has an MBA from Stanford University.

In fact, there are several young turks in the current parliament who have been minted -- academically -- abroad. Mulayam Singh's son Akhilesh studied in Australia. Rahul Gandhi has been in the U.S and U.K, although no one is sure what he studied. Jitin Prasada, son of former MP Jitendra Prasada, might not have studied abroad, but his stint with DSP-Merrill Lynch has given him international exposure.

The idea of the "foreign-returned neta" isn't all that new. Almost the entire top leadership of pre-Independence India was made up of NRIs, a term that did not exist at that time. Gandhi, Patel, Jinnah, Nehru, Bose all studied or lived abroad before returning to India. Those days the Indian elite typically went to Britain to study law. The big difference from now was they came back and worked the ground. These days the formula seems to be -- from MBA in USA to MP in India, although in fairness it must be said tyros like Manavendra Singh have expended more sweat in the desert than in the groves of academe.

Anyway, this past week, we had the rather unusual episode of a seven-member Indian parliamentary delegation visiting New York and Washington, including five who had lived or studied in the United States. Even for a

delegation that represented FICCI's Indo-U.S Parliamentary Forum, this was a little over the top. Besides the aforementioned Singh, Deora, and Pilot, the leader of the delegation, Orissa Rajya Sabha member Jay Panda, is a graduate of Michigan Tech. And then there was Vijay Mallya, honorary alumnus of the Southern California University. Their average age -- less than 40, with Deora and Pilot minnows at 27.

"It was a conscious decision to show the United States the changing face of India," says Panda, 40, who has been with the Forum last three years. "Isn't it a good manifestation of country where 55 per cent of the population is under 25?" asks Deora, with the disarming candor of youth.

It certainly is. And as they moved around the corridors of power meeting Washington's movers and shakers (including Deputy Secretaries Armitage and Wolfowitz, high level pow-wows usually reserved for Indian ministers), they certainly presented a new face of India. These guys are confident and personable. They speak the language Americans understand. They don't have old baggage. "We won't hold your age against you," one of their American interlocutors joked.

Of course, none of this suggests just yet that they are any better guardians of the Indian nation than their parents or political forbears -- men like Jagjivan Ram, Y.B.Chavan or Morarji Desai, who served us well in the tough years of the Cold War. But boy, what a relief it must be for Americans to talk to and listen to a 57-year young country and not be lectured about our 5000-year old civilization. Suddenly, it's the 500-year America that seems old.

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