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AAPI aur hum: Doctors Without Borders

Of all the Indian professional groups in the United States, the Association of American Physicians of Indian-origin, known by the acronym AAPI, is arguably the most influential. With some 40,000 doctors on its rolls, it is better organised than the corresponding association of Indian engineers, which has fewer than 2000 members although the 1990s has mostly been about technology. Not even the celebrated IITians, about 25,000 of whom are believed to reside in the U.S, have managed to summon the kind of collective clout that AAPI has.

The acme of AAPI power came in 1995, when it got then President Bill Clinton to address its annual gathering in Chicago. In subsequent years, Hillary Clinton, Al Gore, and other top leaders of the American establishment have patronised the association. Support for AAPI is bipartisan, although wealthy physicians are veering towards the Republican Party lately. In fact, there has been talk of an Indian-American physician being appointed U.S Surgeon-General, with Florida's Zach Zachariah, a long-tome GOP fund-raiser, mentioned in this context.

But all is not well with AAPI. In fact, an ill wind is blowing through the organisation ahead of its annual meeting in Houston next week. And it centers round a familiar Indian subject -- electoral politics. AAPI has lively annual elections, which is the upside. The downside is these polls have become increasingly controversial and messy. Fat cat physicians, many who have made their millions and are bored with practice, run for office that puts them in proximity to the seat of power.

The trouble began this year after the election of Dr Sampat Shivangi of Jackson, Mississippi, as AAPI's president-elect. A rival physician who lost to him alleged that Dr Shivangi was not licensed to practice medicine in the U.S, and in fact, he had not renewed a limited license that had expired in

1991. Dr Shivangi pointed out that there was nothing in AAPI bylaws that barred a non-practising doctor from running for office. After all he had been elected secretary and vice president in the previous years. If a practising license was the criteria to run, then it would disqualify doctors who had gone into research, administration and other areas. He had won fair and square and was best placed to lobby AAPI's cause.

Not correct, the rival faction fired back. He had won in the past by misrepresenting facts (that he held an active license). A non-licensed, non-practising physician would not be an effective lobbyist and his questionable status would hurt AAPI's cause, they maintained, while urging him to withdraw (after the results had been declared). Dr Shivangi did initially withdraw before changing his mind and taking the matter to court, where it is now slated to come up next week.

Meantime, the flap has opened a can of worms. Some physicians are aghast after finding out that Dr Vijay Koli, last year's president-elect who is going to take over as president this year, is a medical graduate of Patrice Lumumba University in Moscow, and not from any Indian medical college. But then AAPI's by-law does not specify graduating norms either. The only stipulation is that a member should be of "Indian heritage."

In fact, AAPI was originally called Association of American Physicians from India, before the latter part was changed to "Indian-origin" to accommodate the large number of second generation Indian doctors graduating from American medical schools. Now the association is finding out that Indian heritage arrives via Moscow and Mombasa too, and not just from Maryland and Massachusetts. Just as well we haven't colonized Mars yet.
