

Bharara

Washington: For some, he's the scourge of Wall Street; for others, he's the sheriff of the financial district. And don't forget his targeting of terrorists.

Preet Bharara's journey to prosecutorial limelight in New York City's battle against terrorism and white collar shenanigans is built on a spotless reputation paved with professional elan, political rectitude, and not the least, the famed immigrant ethic.

The last attribute is being sullied by a rash of crimes involving South Asians in New York City, from Pakistani-Americans charged with terrorism plans to U.S nationals of Indian and Sri Lankan origins allegedly involved in illegal financial dealings. Bharara, who is the U.S Attorney for the South District of New York (which includes Manhattan) represents a small but growing body of professionals of Indian origin in the U.S who are on the law-enforcement side of the divide.

Last week, as the insider trading case against Sri Lanka-born billionaire Raj Rajaratnam kicked into high gear and drew Indian business icon Rajat Gupta into the dragnet, it turned out that a key investigator in the case was Sanjay Wadhwa, deputy chief of Market Abuse Unit at the US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC). Wadhwa and his team work closely with the Attorney Bharara's office, and it was not lost on anyone that the key principals in the courtroom battle would be South Asians. A few months earlier, it was FBI Special Agent Amit Kachhia-Patel who brought a Russian spy case before Bharara's office.

This is already familiar territory for Bharara. Appointed U.S attorney in 2009 by President Obama (the only one so far of Indian origin among 93), he has handled some of the most high-profile cases in his domain, from bringing down the mafioso Gambino family to busting billionaire investor and Ponzi scammer Bernie Madoff. But it is his prosecution of many South Asians with the help of South Asian enforcers that has caught the eye of the community, with some hyper-nationalists going as far as to say he is on a witch-hunt against people of his own ethnicity.

Among Bharara's quarry have been Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and Faizal Shahzad, both of Pakistani origin, charged with terrorist crimes relating to 9/11 and the Times Square bombing. In a vituperative attack, a Pakistani newspaper last year alleged that Bharara's bias against Pakistanis is because of his "ideological beliefs" going back to the sub-continent's partition. The Nation newspaper also alleged that Bharara appointed a "like-minded controversial Indian who is also known for his hatred and venomous propaganda against Pakistan, Anjan Sahni, as Chief of the Terrorism and International Narcotics Unit soon after he assumed the charge of US Federal Attorney of New York."

But there is very little in Bharara's life or career that points to any prejudice or bias, and his prosecution of Raj Rajaratnam in a case that involves two other Indian-Americans, Anil Kumar and Rajiv Goel, seems to bear that out. In fact, Bharara's origins and career is laced with biographical details that portray him, like President Obama, as the new, composite American, woven of many strands.

Born as Preetinder in 1968 in Ferozepur, Punjab, to a Sikh father and a Hindu mother who both moved from what became Pakistan to the Indian side during Partition, Bharara came with his parents to the U.S as an infant. He grew up in New Jersey, idolizing the local hero Bruce Springsteen. Like Obama, he is an alumnus of Harvard (1990) and Columbia Law School (1993). Kicking off a career in private practice, he married a woman whose father is Muslim and mother is of Jewish-origin.

"Four different families, practicing four different faiths — all compelled to flee a half-century ago because of their religion," he once told a meeting of the South Asian Bar Association, joking, "Even when my wife fasts for Yom Kippur, and my father-in-law fasts for Ramadan, I get to stuff my face with samosas all day."

That light touch, even as he moved up the professional rungs and moved Washington DC, became a trademark. The story goes that after he was appointed Attorney for NY Southern District, he regaled his staff by showing them a self-deprecating video montage he had made of news broadcasters' mispronouncing his name.

But in Washington, his four-year stint as the chief counsel for Senator Charles Schumer, a post that included leading the investigation into the firings of nine U.S. attorneys under President George Bush, brought him immense respect from both sides of the aisle for the clarity and integrity he brought to the job. No one was surprised when President Obama picked him for a job that arguably puts him most in the limelight of all U.S attorneys. And the scuttlebutt in Washington DC is he will be a shoo-in for Attorney General further up in his career.

In taking on Wall Street (the South Asian angle is incidental really), Bharara has signaled a clean-up on a scale that has not been attempted by any previous attorney. "What former Rudy Giuliani (who held Bharara's job) did to the Mob is what Preet Bharara will do to Wall Street," Ravi Batra, an India-born defense lawyer in New York predicted.

In fact, the U.S financial world is already stunned by the use of wire-taps – seldom used in investigating white collar crimes -- by Bharara's sleuths. For many, the writing has been on the wall for Wall Street from the time Bharara took up his current job. "Greed is not good," he had announced right at the outset.