

*December 10, 2006*

---

## **School Scene**

**Y**ears ago, when Indian student inflow to the U.S was still modest compared to the flood now, I visited a school called New Jersey Institute of Technology (NJIT). Even in 1988, the lingua franca in the cafeteria during lunch hour was unmistakably Asian, some English interspersed with much Mandarin, Hindi, Tamil, Kannada, Korean etc.. The joke those days was some Indian lads had renamed NJIT New Jayanagar Institute of Technology, after a suburb in Bangalore. One of them swore he could organize a tennis ball cricket match on campus between Jayanagar fourth block and Jayanagar ninth block.

I did not take up the challenge, although much later I did play tennis ball cricket in, of all places, Midland-Odessa (George Bush's hometown in Texas), where a motley crowd of desi physicians, engineers and itinerants baffled locals with our bouncers, swingers, glances and frequent breaks for drinks. Alas, those days are gone when part of the thrill of being a scattered desi gang in the U.S was to fly across the country or drive 200 miles for a game of bridge.

Now we are everywhere it seems, and as I write this, my e-mail has just pinged to announce a "pani-puri social" this weekend at the University of Maryland by an organization called DESI, which stands for Develop Empower and Synergize India. Meanwhile, a recent report about the dominance of Asian children in New Jersey schools got me thinking the NJIT crowd must have scored well and some of them kids must surely be offsprings of the Class of '88.

The saga of Asian lads -- especially Indian students -- conquering the groves of American academe is well-chronicled. But less well-known is what's happening in American primary, middle and high schools where you don't hear much beyond our kids routinely winning Spelling Bee contests and science scholarships. It appears that in some New Jersey and New York

school districts, Asian/Indian kids are doing so well that school authorities are starting to regard them as something special.

The biggest consideration for Indian families when they move to or within U.S is school districts. Parents will often go to extraordinary lengths -- higher rents, longer commutes to work -- to be able to put their kids in the best school. Often, through word of mouth, they tend to congregate around a highly-rated school.

Something like this is happening in many NJ-NY school districts. According to the report, more than 40 per cent of students in some schools are Asian, although Asians constitute only 4 per cent of U.S population. In NJ's Edison township, home to Little India, 46 percent of the 13,682 students in the School District is Asian. At Edison High School, Indian students have formed the Peacock Society to organize cultural festivals. Schools in nearby Woodbridge are offering classes in Gujarati and Punjabi.

Such attention begets loyalty -- and lolly. The story is now told of a Korean Parents Association that helped raise \$ 40 million for a local school district that needed a big upgrade. There are cases of Korean and Japanese moms taking their kids to the U.S for the school year while corporate dad rakes in the moolah back home. School authorities are now receiving inquiries from Chinese and Indian parents. Shouldn't be long before some buccaneering spirits begin touting a school system that is failing American kids, but is fostering Asian achievement. American college education for foreigners is a \$ 14 billion industry. No one has put a number on the school business.