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Cowboys and Indians in Texas

Ashok Mago winces when you ask how much money he has contributed to the American political system. No, he doesn't fear the IRS taxman or peer envy. "It's something my wife should never hear about," he jokes. The Delhi-born, Dallas-based realtor is among the hundreds of Indian-Americans who have put their money where their mouth is in driving the U.S-India nuclear agreement to near fruition.

When the deal is voted on in the next few days and weeks, there will be many who can take credit for its passage. Business houses have pulled their weight behind the deal, lobbyists have harried lawmakers, and government officials on both sides have worked hard. But most of all, there has been an exhilarating show of strength and unity from American Indophiles, Indian Americaphiles, and Indian-Americans. Never before have people on both sides who wish each other well worked so hard to achieve something.

A surprising amount of desi support has come from an unexpected quarter – George Bush's home state of Texas, and not so much from familiar Indian-American enclaves such as New York-New Jersey and California. In fact, of the 37 co-sponsors of the nuclear legislation, nearly half are law-makers from Texas, including 15 Representatives and both the state's Senators.

In contrast, there is only one co-sponsor each from New Jersey and California. Texas desis are good-naturedly twitting their fellow Indians from liberal and Democratic states such as Massachusetts and Maryland for failing to deliver. Evidently, there is an Indian-American power shift from the Democratic Party and its strongholds to the Republican Party and its pocketboroughs. Of the 37 co-sponsors 24 are Republicans and 13 Democrats.

Texas is not the most hospitable of American states. It is often the butt of jokes elsewhere in the U.S. A critic once said if he owned hell and Texas, he would rent out Texas and live in hell. It is hot, humid, and in the eyes of many Americans, populated by hill-billies, originally slang for the rural folk of eastern mountain ranges. At nearly 700,000 square kilometers, it is almost as large as Pakistan.

But Indians seem to love Texas. They have moved here in droves, taking to its warm climate and hospitable business environment. Indian physicians have gone there from colder states, attracted by lower malpractice insurance. Thousands of Indian students come to the state's large university system that includes University of Texas, Austin, an institution so wealthy from oil discovered on its grounds that it bid for and acquired a Gutenberg bible and operates a nuclear reactor on campus.

Ashok Mago went from Daryaganj, Delhi to Dallas in 1974 arriving just as the city's skyline began to change with an oil- and tech-fuelled building boom. He relates his early trysts with Texas politicians with gusto, warming to the theme that all politics is local. Most Indians, he says, have their first taste of local politics a decade after they come to the U.S through school boards and county elections.

Mago met his local Congressman Pete Sessions when the latter was an employee at Ma Bell. He befriended a local attorney whose wife went on to become a Senator (Kay Bailey Hutchinson). He has known the other Texas Senator, John Cornyn, from the time he was the state's Attorney General. In each case, he backed their political campaign and stayed with them. It's the grassroots touch, he says. Like him, scores of Texas desis have delivered on the nuclear deal, as indeed have Indians from other states, despite the Texas jibe. The word Texas is derived from Tejas (pronounced Te-has), which means friends or allies. Quite.