

*July 9, 2006*

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## **Yankee Comes Home**

**O**ne measure of widespread Indian immigration to the United States was provided by a Gujarati who boasted he could travel across America simply by looking up any local phone book for Patels. New bragging rights from another desi: He's got a cousin on every exit on the New Jersey Turnpike (there are 18). Built in the 1950s as part of Interstate 95 that links the well populated eastern seaboard cities, this arterial highway might soon remind you of a Bombay-Pune journey going by the number of desis you run into at its rest stops and the suburbia that lies alongside.

In fact, two Senators at either end of the NJ turnpike, Joe Biden of Delaware and Hillary Clinton of New York, have in recent months made remarks attesting to the rise in Indian populations. "You can't go into a Seven Eleven or a Dunkin Donuts without an Indian accent," quipped Biden, a putative presidential candidate, recently. Some months back, Hillary jokingly introduced (Mahatma) Gandhi as a gas station attendant from St. Louis. The gags inflamed some Indian-Americans, but the influence of desi constituents is what swung their votes for the nuclear deal.

One benefit of having cousins in NJ is that you can park with them and take a train to New York City, saving yourself driving hassles in America's prickliest city, where overnight parking costs \$ 30 and a quart of blood. On the New Jersey Transit train line that trundles through towns like Edison (which a desi told me should be renamed Ediyur) and Metuchen (Mettur?), you pass by plenty of apna log. You are quite likely to see posters of Amitabh Bachchan, and at least one billboard in Metro Park proclaimed: Shagun -- Your only way to fashion At the Sardar Patel Plaza in Iselin, NJ.

Two weeks in "New Yaark" did nothing to persuade me that it is the most polite city in the world. But the financial world is boiling with passion for India. Some two dozen movers and shakers of Wall Street I met the past fortnight had India on their portfolio, if not on their calendar. Some of the attachment was personal. One analyst said his entire 401K (a retirement

account) was linked to India. The top executive of an ad firm said her son was embarking on an India yatra this summer. A hedge fund patriarch had just returned from three weeks in hamara bharat mahaan. Yes, its cruel to report this when Mumbai is flooded, Delhi is powerless, and Bangalore is out of kilter, but that's the truth – India rules America's money minds, momentarily at least. Where we see despair, they see an opening.

So here's the emerging story: while we are busy 'colonizing' America, or parts of it, Americans are discovering India. Back in the 1960s, backpackers blew into India looking for gyaan and ganja. Now it is the turn of the flashpackers -- which is the term for gizmo-laden travelers – looking for opportunity, not oppression, profits, not poverty. As one American who recently traveled through India recorded on his blog, "It's very refreshing to be in a country on the other side of the world and see American flags ... that aren't on fire."

Much of the changed outlook towards India has to do with Bay Area Badshahs and New York Nawabs, not to speak of the motelier in Mississippi and the realtor in Raleigh. But Americans who come to India these days know something else about the country besides the cacophony of car horns and cows on the road. It's something they are very familiar with: Ka-ching! - the ringing of the cash register.

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