

# SOUTH ASIAN AMERICANS IN U.S. POLITICS

By Roopa Nemi and Amala Nath\*

Asian Americans as a group, are largely underrepresented in United States politics. However, as the second largest and fastest growing demographic, there is a pressing need for our political leaders to reflect the people they represent. This article will highlight the careers of three South Asian American politicians and their efforts to balance the needs of the minority community and the interests of their constituency.

## REPRESENTATIVE SWATI DANDEKAR



Iowa state Representative Swati Dandekar was born in India and moved to Iowa after getting married.<sup>1</sup> She initially got involved in the community by volunteering to teach elementary school children.<sup>2</sup> After having her two sons, she remained actively involved with their education by serving as a school board member.<sup>3</sup> It was her desire to improve education that launched her political career. As she served on the board, others impressed with her work recommended she run for the Iowa House of Representatives.<sup>4</sup>

She approached her campaign with a focus on building a grassroots foundation.<sup>5</sup> She went door to door to chat with her fellow citizens to hear their concerns and also to inform them of the issues she planned on addressing.<sup>6</sup> Her campaign strategy allowed people in her community a chance to get to know Rep. Dandekar as a person beyond the color of her skin because<sup>7</sup> she did not try to flaunt nor hide her ethnicity.<sup>8</sup> Her opponent, Karen Balderston, questioned Rep. Dandekar's ability to represent the community because of her ethnic background.<sup>9</sup> She expressed this concern in an email, which after being intercepted by the media, cost Karen the support of her own party: "While I was growing up in Iowa, learning and reciting the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag, Swati was growing up in India, under the still existent caste system. How can that prepare her for legislating in Iowa or any other part of our great United States?"<sup>10</sup>

Rather than respond to her opponent's attack, Rep. Dandekar chose to run a positive campaign.<sup>11</sup> She believed that people in Iowa treated her as just another member of the community regardless of the color of her skin.<sup>12</sup> In turn, she sought to take the same approach in her campaigning. She reflected on how values in the Indian community and the Iowa community are similar since both focus on education and family.<sup>13</sup> There was no need for her to specifically address just the South Asian American community. When asked about what she felt were important issues for her as a South Asian American politician she responded, "I think the issues important for Asian American politicians are the same as those for any other politician - they

are issues of education for your children, the economy, family security, and health care."<sup>14</sup> As a result, Rep. Dandekar's campaign addressed issues such as improving education, encouraging new businesses to come to the community, improving the quality of jobs, and property tax relief.<sup>15</sup> By representing herself as a member of the Iowa community rather than just the South Asian American community, Rep. Dandekar became the first South Asian American woman elected to a U.S. legislative body in 2002.<sup>16</sup>

## SENATOR SATVEER CHAUDHARY



Minnesota state Senator Satveer Chaudhary has also made significant strides for South Asian Americans in U.S. politics.<sup>17</sup> Unlike Rep. Dandekar, Sen. Chaudhary was born and raised in the United States in his home state of Minnesota.<sup>18</sup> Sen. Chaudhary has acknowledged that being born in Minnesota made it easier to transition to public office as a South Asian American because he was able to enjoy the "dual enrichment" of both cultures.<sup>19</sup>

Sen. Chaudhary initially became involved with social issues during high school.<sup>20</sup> He then joined Minnesota's Democratic Party where he held various state offices.<sup>21</sup> However, it was not until law school, when he served on the campaigns of several local representatives, that Sen. Chaudhary considered politics as a career.<sup>22</sup>

In 1996, he became the first South Asian American elected to the Minnesota legislature.<sup>23</sup> In 2002, at the age of 30, Sen. Chaudhary was looking to become the youngest member of the state senate.<sup>24</sup> He acknowledges that his appeal to supporters during the campaign "stem from the fact that I am a politician for everyone and not just Indian Americans."<sup>25</sup> Like Iowa, the South Asian American community in Minnesota is small, around 16,000.<sup>26</sup> Thus, he had to appeal to the community as a whole during his election campaign. Sen. Chaudhary believes that his "first priority is to the geographic area" that he represents but he also recognizes that his unique situation as an Indian-American politician "cannot be denied...and so I do shoulder extra duties."<sup>27</sup> Similar to Rep. Dandekar, when asked about what the concerns of South Asian Americans, Sen. Chaudhary responded, "Indian issues often coincide with mainstream issues, such as education, health care, technology, freedom from discrimination, and so taking up those causes often serves a dual purpose."<sup>28</sup> With his belief in representing the community as a whole and his strong work ethic, Sen. Chaudhary defeated his

opponent to win a seat in the state senate.<sup>29</sup>

As a senator, Satveer Chaudhary still considers the full representation of his geographical community to be his first priority.<sup>30</sup> This was evident when he was invited to help brief the President on his visit to India but declined to do so because of his duties in Minnesota.<sup>31</sup> Sen. Chaudhary has also shouldered the responsibility of being a South Asian American politician through his involvement in reviving the South Asian language program at the University of Minnesota and by helping to speed up alien labor certification.<sup>32</sup> However, with these projects, Sen. Chaudhary is quick to point out that while they do address some of the South Asian American's community's needs, they are meant to serve all Minnesotans.<sup>33</sup>

### CONGRESSMAN BOBBY JINDAL



Perhaps the most prominent South Asian American in U.S. politics today is Congressman Bobby Jindal. Rep. Jindal's origins mirror that of countless other immigrants who came to the U.S. to fulfill their own personal and professional aspirations as well as to provide a better future for their children.

Rep. Jindal's parents migrated from India to the U.S. a few years prior to Rep. Jindal's birth in Baton Rouge in 1971.<sup>34</sup> Although his parents initially named him "Piyush" he went on to trade that name for "Bobby" when he was four years old based on a character in the popular television show, "The Brady Bunch."<sup>35</sup> Rep. Jindal attended Baton Rouge High School, graduated from Brown University in 1991,<sup>36</sup> and later became a Rhodes Scholar from Oxford University.<sup>37</sup> Upon graduation, Rep. Jindal worked as a consultant with McKinsey and Company and was subsequently appointed Secretary of the Department of Health and Hospitals by Governor Mike Foster in 1996.<sup>38</sup> Capitalizing on the opportunity, Rep. Jindal transformed Louisiana's Medicaid program by converting a \$400 million deficit to a \$220 million surplus in just three years.<sup>39</sup> In 1998, Rep. Jindal became Executive Director of the National Bipartisan Commission on the Future of Medicare which was comprised of a 17-member panel responsible for reforming Medicare.<sup>40</sup> Thereafter, he went on to serve as the President of the University of Louisiana System and in 2001 at the age of 29, he was appointed the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation of Health and Human Services by President George W. Bush.<sup>41</sup>

However, despite Rep. Jindal's academic and professional successes, certain areas in his personal life, in particular his decision to convert from Hinduism to Christianity, created controversy among the South Asian American community.<sup>42</sup> As a graduate student, Rep. Jindal stated "my journey from Hinduism to Christianity was a gradual and painful one" which began years earlier with the influence of a close friend who encouraged Rep. Jindal to convert to Christianity.<sup>43</sup> However, unconvinced by conversations with his friend, Rep. Jindal started reading the Bible which not only led him to question Hinduism as a faith but moreover captivated his attention and intellectual curiosity.<sup>44</sup> Thereafter, based on studies of historical accounts of the Bible, films about the life and sacrifices of Jesus Christ and thought-provoking dialogues with a pastor, Rep. Jindal decided "to take that leap of faith and accept Christ into my life."<sup>45</sup> His next great challenge, however, was making his parents accept and understand his new found faith. Rep. Jindal wrote: "I long for the day when my parents understand, respect and possibly accept my faith. For now I am satisfied that they accept me."<sup>46</sup> In time, although his parents grew to accept his choice, he was still confronted with skepticism from the South Asian American community. In an article by Ramesh Rao, Professor of Communication at Truman State University in Missouri, the author criticized Rep. Jindal's conversion to Christianity and also labeled Rep. Jindal as an "extreme social conservative."<sup>47</sup> Although Rao acknowledged Rep. Jindal's professional achievements, he remained concerned about Rep. Jindal's attempt to disregard his socio-cultural roots and heritage and wrote that Rep. Jindal's conversion was perhaps "the only way as an Indian-American Hindu [Bobby] could achieve his political ambitions."<sup>48</sup>

However, despite the admonishment of certain members of the South Asian American community, Bobby Jindal continued his foray into politics by announcing his decision to run for governor in 2003.<sup>49</sup> While campaigning, he appealed to his constituents by not identifying himself as ethnically divergent but rather as an individual born and raised in the state who shared the same values and concerns of its citizens and would help them accomplish "their American dream."<sup>50</sup> Although Bobby Jindal lost the gubernatorial elections by a narrow margin to his opponent, Kathleen Blanco, he went on to become the Congressional Representative of the 1st District of Louisiana. While following Bobby Jindal's campaign trail, John Fund, a noted journalist, commented that "he treats his Indian background as an overall plus but won't trade on it."<sup>51</sup> Bobby Jindal further advocated: "I'm against all quotas, all set-asides...America is the greatest. We got ahead by hard work. We shouldn't respond to every problem with a government program. Here, anyone can succeed."<sup>52</sup>

## ENDNOTES

\* Roopa Nemi and Amala Nath are both first year students at American University Washington College of Law.

\*\* All photos courtesy of the Indian American Center for Political Awareness

<sup>1</sup> Neela Banerjee, *Swati Dandekar is Iowa's Rising Political Star* (May 9, 2003), available at <http://www.asianam.org/Swati%20Dandekar.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

<sup>4</sup> Aparnaa Narayanan, *Road to Success*, Sahara Magazine (2003), available at <http://www.appibhaskar.com/writing/articles/successmain.html> [hereinafter Narayanan].

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*

<sup>8</sup> *Up and Coming Asian American Politicians: Swati Dandekar*, Public Broadcasting Service (2004), available at [http://www.pbs.org/searching/aap\\_sdandekar.html](http://www.pbs.org/searching/aap_sdandekar.html) [hereinafter PBS].

<sup>9</sup> George Joseph, *Dandekar Becomes the First Indian American Woman Lawmaker* (Nov. 6, 2002), available at <http://www.rediff.com/us/2002/nov/06us.htm> [hereinafter Joseph].

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*

<sup>11</sup> PBS, *supra* note 8.

<sup>12</sup> Narayanan, *supra* note 4.

<sup>13</sup> *Id.*

<sup>14</sup> PBS, *supra* note 8.

<sup>15</sup> Joseph, *supra* note 9.

<sup>16</sup> *Id.*

<sup>17</sup> See generally, Sumeet Chatterjee, *Satveer Chaudhary Visits Haryana, Rajasthan*, NEWS INDIA-TIMES (Dec. 20, 2002), available at <http://www.newsindia-times.com/2002/12/20/india-14-satveer.html> [hereinafter Chatterjee].

<sup>18</sup> State Senator Satveer Chaudhary, *Senator Chaudhary's Background*, available at [http://www.chaudhary.org/index.asp?Type=B\\_BASIC&SEC={2E80BB4A-67B6-45D5-B7AA-1AF919FD8882}&DE={3811C296-25BC-46FD-A78B-9B549197A60E}](http://www.chaudhary.org/index.asp?Type=B_BASIC&SEC={2E80BB4A-67B6-45D5-B7AA-1AF919FD8882}&DE={3811C296-25BC-46FD-A78B-9B549197A60E}) [hereinafter Background].

<sup>19</sup> Chat Transcript, State Senator Satveer Chaudhary, available at [http://www3.earth.com/stores/media/chat\\_transcript\\_satveer.pdf](http://www3.earth.com/stores/media/chat_transcript_satveer.pdf).

<sup>20</sup> Chatterjee, *supra* note 17.

<sup>21</sup> *Id.*

<sup>22</sup> *Id.*

<sup>23</sup> Press Release, Minnesota's First Asian American Legislator Seeks State Senate Seat; Asian American Action Fund to Host Fundraiser Boosting Campaign, Asian Fortune, available at [http://www.asianfortune.com/Asian\\_News/chinaburb/census/aaafund9\\_00.html](http://www.asianfortune.com/Asian_News/chinaburb/census/aaafund9_00.html).

<sup>24</sup> *Id.*

<sup>25</sup> Background, *supra* note 18.

<sup>26</sup> *Id.*

<sup>27</sup> Background, *supra* note 18.

<sup>28</sup> *Id.*

<sup>29</sup> Chatterjee, *supra* note 17.

<sup>30</sup> Background, *supra* note 18.

<sup>31</sup> *Id.*

<sup>32</sup> *Id.*

<sup>33</sup> *Id.*

<sup>34</sup> John Fund, *Bobby Jindal's Rise*, WALL STREET JOURNAL (Oct. 9, 2003) available at <http://www.opinionjournal.com/diary/?id=110004134> [hereinafter Fund].

<sup>35</sup> *Id.*

<sup>36</sup> U.S. Congressman Bobby Jindal, *Bobby Jindal Biography*, available at <http://www.bobbyjindal.com/bio.pdf> [hereinafter *Bobby Jindal Biography*].

<sup>37</sup> Fund, *supra* note 34.

<sup>38</sup> *Id.*

<sup>39</sup> *Bobby Jindal Biography*, *supra* note 36.

<sup>40</sup> *Id.*

<sup>41</sup> *Id.*

<sup>42</sup> Francis C. Assisi & Elizabeth Pothen, *The Agony And Ecstasy of Bobby Jindal*, available at <http://www.indolink.com/Living/America/a91.php>.

<sup>43</sup> *Id.*

<sup>44</sup> *Id.*

<sup>45</sup> *Id.*

<sup>46</sup> *Id.*

<sup>47</sup> Ramesh N. Rao, *Who Is The Real Bobby Jindal?* (Nov. 14, 2003) available at <http://rameshnao.com/politics-who-real-bobby-jindal.html>

<sup>48</sup> *Id.*

<sup>49</sup> *Bobby Jindal Biography*, *supra* note 36.

<sup>50</sup> *Id.*

<sup>51</sup> Fund, *supra* note 34.

<sup>52</sup> *Id.*