

# Resistance, Desi Style

Many Indian-Americans are rallying against the Trump administration, even as a broad sense of solidarity in the community remains elusive



In this Jan. 30 photo, a protester waves an American flag in front of the Supreme Court during a protest about President Donald Trump's recent executive orders in Washington.

AP Photo/Alex Brandon

By Shilpi Paul

**W**hen it comes to grassroots political activity, Indian Americans don't often appear on the frontlines. Held up as a so-called "model minority," Indian Americans are more likely to be found in their homes having heated political discussions or quietly lobbying their Congressmen for pro-India policies, rather than rocking the boat with anti-establishment rhetoric heard on the streets.

In the new age of Trump, all the old norms have been turned upside down. A new generation of Indian Americans are holding prominent positions in the new resistance, marching, protesting, writing op-eds and speaking out against the new establishment in Washington.

"I'm seeing Indians on the frontlines, at the Women's March, the March against Trump on Inauguration Day and at the demonstrations at the airport," said Manju Rajendran, a community organizer and long-time activist from Durham, North Carolina. "I've been organizing for 25 years, and I've never seen a groundswell like this. Our tendency to be sectarian is vanishing--we are seeing solidarity



AP Photo/Evan Vucci

across issues."

On Jan. 29, Rajendran, her mother, her partner and her baby, all spent the day at the Raleigh-Durham airport, making a strong stand against the chaos and injustice they saw in Trump's Muslim travel ban. "There were immigrants there from every country," said Rajendran. "It felt really heartening. There is an outpouring of support across race, sexuality and immigration status."

Rajendran's mother, Vimala Rajendran, owns a restaurant in the area, and has been holding

monthly "Refugees Welcome" lunches, inviting nervous refugees, immigrants and allies to enjoy a free lunch and talk about their fears in a safe space, despite a backlash from Trump supporters who flood online to curse the restaurant and event.

Besides attending spontaneous marches, Indians are also appearing in organized capacities, unafraid to speak out against Trump. The night before the inauguration, "Jacobin" magazine, a left-wing publication, hosted an event in D.C. called the

Anti-Inauguration. A series of unapologetic speeches condemning the incoming Trump administration, the event featured speakers including Noami Klein and Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor imploring the crowd to resist the "corporate coup d'etat" and lamenting the failure of the status quo to provide a good life for most Americans over the last few decades.

The crowd at the Lincoln Theater was filled with anti-establishmentarians, with dreadlocks, symbols patching their

coats and a humming break-things-down energy.

And appearing first on stage was the organizer of the event, Bhaskar Sunkara, a second-generation immigrant with Trinidadian-Indian roots and the founding editor and publisher of "Jacobin."

"Obviously today is not a very happy day," said Sunkara at the sold-out event. "But one of the reasons we are here is that Trump doesn't actually have a mandate. We are here to try and build an alternative. More than ever, we need a movement with vibrant politics and ideas."

During the rise of Bernie Sanders during the primaries, "Jacobin" became a meeting place for like-minded supporters of Sanders' brand of social democracy. Since the election of Trump, Jacobin's subscriber base doubled, reaching 30,000. Recent headlines include "Trump: O. Democrats: O. People: 1." and "Where is our Labor Party?"

"Everything sped up," said Sunkara in an interview. "Whereas before, it seemed like we would spend 10 or 20 years slowly contesting Clintonism, now is the moment to really try to reserve political leadership while the centrist forces are discredited and kind of reeling. The

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country has anti-establishment, populist kind of mood.”

Sunkara, a “good communist and atheist” who also attends Hindu pujas with his family, says he became politicized after 9/11, and sees a similar opportunity for the Hindu community now.

“It’s not like we have a card with an Om sign identifying us as Hindus,” said Sunkara. “You look like a Muslim to white America, in airports and society. That helped me associate more broadly with all South Asians and people from the Arab world and so on.”

If some mainstream Americans are lumping Indian Americans into a larger class of brown-skinned not-quite-Americans, others may be flattering them as “model minorities.” Even Trump, reminds Sunkara, has spoken out in support of keeping highly skilled immigrants in the country. But some warn the community to beware of such categories.

“It’s important to recognize the special role that Hindu Americans play - we are set up as a counterpoint to Muslims or other races,” said Anand Gopal, a journalist and author of the acclaimed book *No Good Men Among the Living: America, the Taliban and the War Through Afghan Eyes*.

If that counterpoint can be utilized by the establishment to vilify other minority groups, Indian Americans have a responsibility to stand up at this moment in history, believes Gopal.

“I would love to see more Indian Americans from a Hindu background stand in solidarity with Muslims,” said Gopal. “The



Bhaskar Sunkara



India” and “Clean India” campaigns echo Trump’s desire to Make America Great Again, to bring manufacturing jobs back and to build up crumbling infrastructure.

“Modi is someone with the same politics as Trump, though he is a little more well-spoken” said Sunkara, “but even Indian Americans who oppose Trump and have traditionally voted with the Congress Party were excited to see Modi at Madison Square Garden - it’s a source of national pride. There’s a lot of exceptionalism. There are a lot of things that go on in the subcontinent that go very much across the bounds in Indian American society. The challenge is to create the narrative and framework that ties together these things.”

Historic parallels also exist, Rajendran said. “Indians are in a unique position because of their knowledge of a totalitarian or hate-mongering administrations. We are so conscious of the history of colonialism that pits people against each other, and Partition, that cost so many lives, and of having to defend democracy and plurality.

“It reminds me of this moment my father told me about, the day after Indira Gandhi announced the Emergency as a means of controlling media and other aspects of society. She said that the Emergency required that she control the press, and [“The Indian Express”] published a blank page in protest. My father said that people were just pouring into the streets in protest. That feels like this moment all over again on different soil.”

While Sunkara was heartened by the sheer number of protesters at the women’s marches and the airport protests, he is skeptical that a broad sense of solidarity will motivate most Indian

Americans.

“Like any community, the South Asian community is extremely class divided,” said Sunkara. “You’ll see different world views and levels of incorporation into the political machine from Gujarati families in New Jersey who have been here since the 60s and 70s than you would see in newer South Asian immigrants, a lot of whom are more working class. I don’t think a larger sense of solidarity exists.”

Effective political action, said Sunkara, will come from organized groups fighting for something specific, like South Asian taxicab drivers who participated in the strike at JFK airport, or perhaps physicians organizing for single-payer health care. For Indians and Indian Americans in

model minority is a myth--rather than coming here with nothing, most successful Indian Americans are just continuing their class background from India.”

“I’ve personally been disappointed by the Indian American community over the years,” said Gopal. “The community has been very much in line with the establishment.”

Gopal also spoke at the Anti-Inauguration event, encouraging the crowd to continue resisting and to create an alternative to both the status quo and “Trump’s crony capitalism.” He cheered on the masses in their plans for public acts of resistance, encouraging them with historic examples of successful protest.

“It’s not a stretch to say that the protests [to the travel ban] at the airport sparked the bedrock of nationwide outrage, and that’s the context in which these court cases should be seen,” said Gopal later. “Mobilizing has such an impact - it’s our only hope. There’s a real danger in saying ‘let’s wait four years.’”

As a journalist who has contributed to “The Atlantic,” “New Yorker” and “The Nation,” Gopal strives to report from a truthful, objective view of the world, he said. But, he added, “When you see racists and fascists, you speak out. I don’t think you need to be neutral to be truthful.”

Indian Americans also find themselves with parallels to ponder. Many articles are written about the similarities between Trump and Prime Minister Modi, whose nationalism, “Make in

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