

Asian and Democrat: Portraits of a new equation

Prime attendees at the Democratic Party's Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) Leadership Summit

SAM RAO

San Jose, Calif.

WITH an estimated 11 million illegal immigrants already in the United States, minority rights and immigration reforms are firmly on the political agenda. These are issues close to the hearts of Asian Americans.

The Democratic Party's Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) Leadership Summit at the start of this month—the first of its kind—was symbolic of the rising political significance of immigrants, and their role in the emerging context. Even high-schoolers participated in the event, signifying a political coming-of-age for Asian American immigrants. Sketches of some prime Indian-American attendees at the summit and their views:

Parag Mehta (29): Houston-raised Democratic National Committee (DNC) staffer Mehta is a die-hard Democrat and maintains the party line of representing all Asian-Americans. Immigration reforms and legalization of all “illegals” on humanitarian grounds remains high on his agenda, apart from moving forward on Howard Dean-inspired “Reconnect with the grassroots”—the current theme of the Democratic Party.



Mehta, son of well known psychiatrist and community leader and Republican, Vijay Mehta, has traveled around the country conducting his workshops, with a plan to energize the masses, and focus on new inductees to the Democratic Party.



Sunil Garg (54): A “Lifelong Democrat” from New Jersey, this attorney came to the summit inspired by the Democrats’ new theme of engaging and touching base with Asian Americans and Indian-Americans. Garg, who holds a Ph.D (Chemistry) from Stevens Institute (N.J.) and a law degree from Rutgers University (N.J.), was a member on the transition team of Senator Corzine, when the latter assumed office as Governor of New Jersey in 2004.

He firmly believes in promoting youth with the Democratic Party and mentoring was on

his mind as he spoke with several other younger Indian-Americans present. The three topics on his mind for this election cycle were immigration reforms, healthcare with an emphasis on funding and research targeted towards the South Asian community. Having raised his 15-year-old daughter Neena in the US, he is also keen that second generation Indian-Americans take interest and respect their heritage and courses available in Hindi, Gujarati, Telugu etc. rather than being “forced to learn French or German”.



Satinder Singh Malhi (24): Malhi works as a legislative aide on Congressman Henry Waxman staff in Sacramento, California. He claims to be the only fully-dressed Sikh right to his long beard

proudly representing the Indian-American community in the State’s capital city.

Right from school days, Singh was passionate about politics and even worked on the campaign for CA Lt. Governor of Jackie Spier in 2004. Malhi, raised in East Bay city of Martinez, founded the first Young Democrats club while at the Alhambra High School. “Apathy is the main problem with our community and youth,” says Singh, having recently graduated from UC-Santa Cruz, majoring in political science. Having worked in the finance department of the Democratic party of Northern California, Malhi feels that he has got a good grip on the ways of his party. He is very interested in mobilizing new recruits for his party.

Kamil Hasan: A venture capitalist from Saratoga, he was recently appointed to the



DNC as a member-at-large. This important appointment to the national level body interacts with the Democratic Caucuses and lawmakers on the Capitol Hill. “I thought the meeting (AAPI summit) was an important milestone. The meeting was very successful and clearly indicated the inroads the Asian communities have started to make into the political arena, including many candidates running for elective offices,” he says.

“Indian Americans have started to get some recognition in the political world because of our intellectual and financial resources and our ability to raise significant funds for political candidates. But we are too small in number. Therefore, to develop our political clout, we need to develop coalitions with other communities,” Hasan says.



Preeti Kulkarni (25): From Los Angeles, Preeti believes in supporting the best candidate for the job. Discovering public life early in her college life at Duke University, North Carolina, Kulkarni is working on a campaign to get Chinese-American John Chiang elected to the local assembly district. She also worked on Dean’s presidential bid in 2004 and several other local campaigns and initiatives. She listed the current war in Iraq, immigration and “an agenda to help progressive and electable Asian-American candidates to public office” as her reason to be at the Leadership Summit in San Jose.

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Indian Ocean concert raises \$20,000

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Los Altos, Calif.

INDIAN fusion band *Indian Ocean* performed to a sold-out concert at Smithwicke Theatre at Foothill College on April 10. Organized by the Association for India’s Development (AID) Bay Area chapter, a non-profit organization, the concert raised \$20,000 for projects in India.

Vocalist and guitarist Asheem Chakravarty started the concert with *From the ruins* a deeply melodious song with Sanskrit shlokas from the Vedas. From this uplifting start, the concert moved on to faster paced numbers, which received enthusiastic response from 900-strong crowd. When asked to pick a specific “stand out” composition of the performance by the group, an organizer said: “It’s like trying to pick the brightest diamond from an array of sparkling gems.”

However, some of the most popular compositions with the audience included *Jhini*—a foot-tapping number based on Kabeer’s poetry, *Hille Re*—a quirky and rousing piece from Bihar, *Bande*—with sombre and moving lyrics from the Bollywood movie *Black Friday*. A special touch at the concert was—*Ma Rewa*—an ode to the river Narmada which hit the right note with several AID activists—many who have joined the Nar-



Band in performance. Pradeep Nagraj

mada Bachao Andolan with Medha Patkar in India.

Bass guitarist Rahul Ram, who interacts with audiences most often among his band members, was in his element as he led interesting banter with the audience, exchanging witty stories about what inspired each song. The band’s activist stance was visible in many of their songs such as *Bol we will* about nature’s wrath with human interference and *Kya maloom*, a response to the Kargil War.

The band worked well in unison, and showed great rapport with their improvised pieces. Drummer Amit Kilam and Rahul Ram’s improvisa-

tion during *Ma Rewa* and that of guitarist Susmit Sen, Rahul Ram and Asheem Chakravarty in *Bol we will* went well with the audience. Kilam also played the gabgubi and the flute in addition to the drums in several musically-rich sections, while Sen’s guitar was focused.

The talented Ram’s full-throated singing added punch to the songs as did Chakravarty’s rich voice with an amazing vocal range. The band concluded to a standing ovation with *Kandisa*—an Aramaic number with jazz undertones—leaving the SF Bay Area audience asking for more.

