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“Migration, Political participation and the Indian-American Community”

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Migration, Political participation and the Indian-American Community

Abstract

This paper examines the political participation of the Indian-American community through the lens of mutual recognition theories. Tracing the historical evolution of Indian migration to the United States, it situates contemporary political behaviour within experiences of institutional recognition and misrecognition. Drawing on Hegelian and Axel Honneth's recognition frameworks, the analysis explores how legal status, socio-economic positioning, community density, and symbolic inclusion shape political alignment and engagement. Despite high levels of economic integration, Indian-Americans continue to encounter conditional recognition, influencing both inter- and intra-community political dynamics. The paper argues that political participation among Indian-Americans reflects an ongoing struggle for recognition within the American democratic polity.

Introduction

There has been a significant rise in the migration of Indians to the United States of America from the beginning of the 21st Century. The percentage increase of 150% was observed, as cited by Popat et al. (2025). The population of Indian origin Americans is about 5.2 million (Deuskar, 2024). They constitute about 1.5% of the total population, being the largest Asian-American subgroup in the US (Popat et al., 2025).

The Indian-American population of the United States are a diverse community. The delays and bureaucratic red tape that the immigrant communities have to face even today are having a significant influence on their support for certain political parties and ideologies (Sharma, 2024). However, there are studies that have shown that the inclinations towards political parties among the Indian-American community are not as straightforward as one would think. The perception of and participation in the political realm also vary. However, the inclinations and support for either party are a nuanced phenomenon due to different factors at play. The following paper is an attempt to understand the Indian diaspora in the US to establish a context and analyse their political participation through the lens of recognition theories.

History

The process of movement to the United States of America began during the colonial period. The movement of labourers from one colony to another by the British was underway. The slave trade led to a large number of Africans moving into the US (Munshi, 2022).

The first ever instance of an Indian's arrival in the United States of America was in 1790, popularly referred to as the 'Man from Madras' (Bagoria, 2009). This was followed by a slow and small number of Indians travelling to the country. During the beginning of the 20th Century, the movement increased significantly, where the number increased to 1000 Indians in the US by 1907 from a single digit in 1900. The initial group of immigrants significantly consisted of Sikhs from India, with a few Hindus and Muslims (Bagoria, 2009; Valentine & M, 2024).

Most of the Indians moved to the Pacific Northwest, especially the state of California. The need for labourers in the farm sector was high in the state, which was the reason for a concentration of immigrants in these regions. The immigrants were working as farmers, then transitioned into land owners and moved towards central California. However, like the discrimination that the Chinese faced post the 'Chinese Exclusion Act' of 1882, Indians too were subjected to similar discrimination post 1907 (Munshi, 2022). Indians were denied entry as well, and the naturalised Indians were also stripped of their citizenship.

Valentine and M (2024) cite one of the first policies that barred Indians from entering the country, like "[t]he Immigration Act of 1917 also known as the Asiatic Barred Zone Act, restricted immigration from Asia." This was then followed up with the 'Immigration Act of 1924', which specified a threshold on the number of immigrants who were accepted into the country. The shift from nationality-based to skill-based immigration policies was seen under President Johnson. Following 1965, many professionals moved to the US, following which families moved to the post mid-1970s. The focus of the policies in the US was to increase the flow of highly skilled professionals into the country (Valentine & M, 2024). The movement of Indians to the US has continued to this day. However, with conservative nature of the political environment has currently led to immigration laws that restrict movement.

Theoretical Context

Recognition Theories

Recognition takes several different forms, from recognising a friend on the street to recognising and respecting the rights of an individual. The levels at which the process unfolds include interpersonal, social, and legal, to name a few. The act of recognition is not limited to others, rather, it provides a means of understanding oneself. One of the first thinkers to discuss the philosophical understanding of the act or process of recognition can be credited to Hegel. He was inspired by Johann Fichte, who said that recognising oneself as an individual to understand oneself as a free self. This highlights that in order for one to realise one's own freedom, recognising others as being free individuals is a necessary condition. The freedom, then, is possible and limited by the demands of others (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, n.d.).

The normative basis of recognition is when one recognises, for example, the outward appearance of an individual and also adopts a positive attitude towards it. This act of recognition obligates one to treat the other in a certain manner. Hegel's story also emphasises that when one attacks another's farm, it is not just a mere act of gaining material access, but to establish one's freedom. Such acts of seeking recognition act as barriers to mutual recognition, since if one kills the other, then the recognition one was seeking is impossible to gain. Mutual recognition allows one to gain self-consciousness. The process of recognition for Hegel is mutual, where self-consciousness is achieved by each individual through being acknowledged by another as equal and free (Iser, 2013).

There were many other thinkers after Hegel who expanded beyond his philosophy of mutual recognition. One such example includes Axel Honneth's theory, which emphasised the need for institutional recognition. Expanding on Honneth's theory, the need for institutional recognition is to ensure that certain rights which are associated with an identity are granted through the recognition. Institutional recognition refers more to the formal recognition, which grants rights to individuals to exercise them within boundaries defined by the institution, highlighting the significance of the source of recognition (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, n.d.).

The failure to experience recognition adequately affects the way individuals view themselves. This experience of misrecognition can act as a barrier against a person's relationship with their identity and denial or undervaluing of their rights (Iser, 2013).

Contemporary Migration Patterns and Socio-economic Position

The 1990s marked a major turning point in the migration of Indians to the United States. The U.S. software boom and expanding economy attracted a large number of highly skilled Indian professionals. The U.S. Immigration Act of 1990, implemented in 1995, facilitated this process through the creation of the H-1B temporary worker visa program, which allowed American businesses to employ foreign workers in “speciality occupations,” including medicine, engineering, and information technology. Indian citizens quickly became the top recipients of H-1B visas, contributing to a diaspora characterised by high levels of education and professional success. The article states that “[t]he US Census Bureau estimates that 75 per cent of all ethnic Indians working in the US hold at least a bachelor’s degree, and 69 per cent work in management and professional occupations.” (Rao, 2013).

The new Indian diaspora in the United States is also highly organised, represented by numerous cultural, professional, and charitable associations at both regional and national levels. Their growing social and political influence has been evident in the rise of prominent Indian-origin public figures such as Bobby Jindal, Nikki Haley, and Preet Bharara, as well as the establishment of the India Caucus in both the U.S. Congress and Senate (Rao, 2013).

Political Participation

The presence of a significant Indian origin population in the US who are relatively well off has a significant influence on the political environment. The Republicans as well as the Democrats have appealed to the minority communities. There was a special focus that was placed on the Indian-American section of the population in the 2024 Presidential elections, with Kamal Harris portraying herself as the daughter of an immigrant from Tamil Nadu, India and the Republican popularising Usha Vance, the wife of the current Vice President of the US (Jonko, 2024).

Empirical evidence suggests that this engagement is matched by growing material participation. A study was conducted by Popat et al. (2025) to analyse the campaign contributions made by Indian-Americans over the years. The analysis was based on data from the Federal Election Commission (FEC) and the OpenSecrets data. The data does not classify the sources of contributions based on their ethnicity or nationality however, the names of the sources are available. This data was utilised to estimate the number of Indian-Americans

contributing to the campaigns. The contribution made by the Indian diaspora to elections has been increasing significantly over the years.

Historically, the immigrant community who are not white ethnically were in support of the democrats. The far-left ideologies were more favourable to immigrants in terms of their needs, acceptance of diversity, space to express one's own culture and so on. There has been a shift recently, however, there are arguments being made that this shift is not just based on immigration laws, rather also focused on the economic downfall that was felt (Deuskar, 2024). Economy, social values, and immigration are highly influential topics in determining the choice Indian-Americans make between political parties (Prasad & Nordlund, 2010). The majority of the funds for campaigns have historically been given to the Democrats. However, in the states of Wyoming and Florida, where the Indian population is minimal, there have been significant contributions made by wealthy businessmen to the Republican Party.

This variation in political alignment among Indian-Americans may also be understood through the lens of cultural assimilation and community density. In states where the Indian population is relatively small, individuals may experience greater pressure to assimilate into the dominant host culture to secure social and economic acceptance. This drive for integration can make them more receptive to the conservative values of the Republican Party, which often emphasise alignment with mainstream American identity. Conversely, in states with a significant Indian population, the presence of strong community networks provides a sense of cultural security and belonging. These communities function as safe spaces that allow individuals to preserve aspects of their homeland identity, express cultural practices more freely, and align with parties that are perceived as more supportive of multiculturalism and diversity. Thus, the regional concentration of Indian-Americans may influence their degree of assimilation and, in turn, their political preferences.

The Indian-American community were strongly supportive of the conservative fiscal policies of the Republicans; however, there has been only a marginal shift in support moving from the Democrats (Sharma, 2024). However, there has been continued support for the Democrats. The reasons for the same have, however, not been based on specific policies, but rather on the symbolic importance that they hold. This is especially true among the Indian-American Women. A focus group discussion among the women revealed that a lot of them, who might not align with the Democrats' ideology and policies on certain issues due to their personal beliefs, have a sense of safety with the party that continues to act as an influence on

their political inclination (Prasad & Nordlund, 2010). The reason seems to be more symbolic in nature. Such sentiments highlight how political participation can serve as a response to broader social recognition, or the lack thereof. Honneth's framework helps interpret this as a pursuit of rights recognition where individuals seek validation as equal participants in the moral and political life of society. Through political engagement, Indian-Americans assert both their belonging and their moral worth within the American polity.

Political socialisation within Indian-American families suggests a bidirectional influence on political views among the children (second generation) and their parents. The first-generation immigrants were informed about the political environment in the US by their family members. However, the second generation's sources of information were rooted in the broader civic and cultural integration (Prasad & Nordlund, 2010). The institutional recognition of the second generation is rooted in their citizenship, which is lacking among the first generation. The first-generation immigrants often remain partially alienated due to visa backlogs, delayed citizenship. This can be considered a form of misrecognition.

As Axel Honneth's mutual recognition theory suggests how migration experiences involving misrecognition (being treated as perpetual outsiders or second-class) shape identity and politics. For migrants, Honneth argues, self-realisation depends on "legally guaranteed autonomy" and being recognised in law. The denial of the same through institutions that delay or deny legal status, migrants feel their dignity and contributions are unrecognised, which can have electoral consequences (Iser, 2013).

This dynamic becomes more complex in the context of recent U.S. immigration politics. The political discourse around illegal immigration, particularly under the Trump administration, has indirectly made life more difficult even for legal immigrants. This has been achieved through increasing visa scrutiny and lengthening processing times. Within the Indian-American community, this has created a subtle hierarchy of recognition between citizens, legal permanent residents, and those still awaiting status regularisation. Legal immigrants may come to view themselves as distinct, or even superior, to undocumented migrants, reproducing a politics of conditional recognition within their own community. Yet this differentiation also reveals an underlying insecurity: the fear that any expansion of immigration or policy backlash could jeopardise their own hard-earned stability. This internalisation of stratified recognition underscores Honneth's claim that misrecognition, whether experienced externally from the host society or internally within immigrant groups,

can fracture solidarity and suppress political expression. Consequently, Indian-Americans who might otherwise act as active contributors to civic life may temper their voices, seeking safety and legitimacy in conformity rather than open political participation.

The author Shukla (2025) mentions the growing anti-Indian sentiments in the United States, especially in states like California, where a bill made into a law could possibly violate the civil rights of Indians. The anti-Indian sentiments are not restricted to the other, the non-Indians, rather are prevalent within the group (Indians) (Shukla, 2025). From a recognition perspective, these intra-group tensions demonstrate that political participation is not only about access but also about negotiating diverse and sometimes conflicting identities within the larger frame of American citizenship.

Rao (2013) states that the Indian "...share of the population in the US is less than one per cent, Indians account for well over five per cent of the scientists, engineers, and software specialists, and almost ten per cent of all the doctors. No group has a higher median household income than Indians, which is almost double that of the overall average of the United States." Yet Indian-Americans continue to encounter challenges related to misrecognition and prejudice. Although they are often perceived as a "model minority," the community remains vulnerable to xenophobia and racially motivated violence, as seen in the attacks by "Dot-buster" gangs in New Jersey and the 2012 massacre at a Sikh gurdwara in Wisconsin. These contrasting experiences of success and discrimination underscore the complex nature of recognition for the Indian diaspora in America (Rao, 2013).

When the process of assimilation, where one integrates into the host society while almost completely letting go of their previous cultural identity (Bhatia & Ram, 2009), occurs, it might lead to Americans of Indian origins having no indication of their ethnicity in their names. This is a natural process, and hence the process of classifying people based on their names alone is a flawed process. The idea that most Indians would still continue to have names that hint at their roots is not a certainty. There is again a misrecognition based on one aspect of one's identity, which in this case is the name of the individual.

The narratives of post-9/11 racialization are another example. Indians, like other South Asian immigrants, were experiencing racial profiling and symbolic exclusion. This illustrates a rupture in this recognition process. The experiences of fear, scrutiny, and conditional acceptance led to immigrants experiencing a withdrawal of social esteem and moral recognition, even when structurally integrated into American society. This

misrecognition undermined their sense of belonging and political agency. In Honneth's terms, the denial of solidarity and respect eroded self-confidence and self-worth, leading to civic withdrawal and insecurity in public spaces. Yet, the same crisis also spurred new forms of political engagement as a struggle for recognition, where Indian-Americans mobilised to assert their dignity and reclaim equal membership within the polity. Thus, recognition theory reveals that the political participation of Indian immigrants is not merely a matter of legal rights or socioeconomic status but fundamentally about being *seen and valued* as legitimate contributors to the civic community.

Conclusion

At its core, political participation reflects the intersection of individual needs, community interest and societal recognition. There might be a perception that, due to more conservative immigration policies that Trump was propagating, the Indian-American community would be dissuaded from supporting the Republicans. However, there are various other factors at play, as discussed previously, which reveal the complex reality in their political behaviour.

The Indian-American community are relatively affluent economically speaking. This ensures that their influence in the socio-political realm cannot be discounted and will continue to grow. The conservative policies by the Trump administration and the barriers to institutional recognition of migrants and their legal status in the country, will significantly impact the Indian-American community as a whole. The struggle for recognition within the community will increase, which will in turn produce more instances of misrecognition of the other and by the other. The other in this instance include more in-group and out-group members. The evolving experience of recognition and misrecognition at the different levels as discussed by Honneth, will continue to shape the identity of Indian-Americans and influence the nature of their political participation.

This feeds into the justifications made for identity politics. More than justification, it probably provides legitimacy to group people however, due to the multicultural nature of societies and especially in a country like the US, this approach can backfire. A lot of the other ethnically marginalised communities are shifting their support to the Republicans for this reason.

In conclusion, the political engagement of Indian-Americans illustrates how recognition—whether granted, denied, or internally fragmented—shapes collective identity and participation. Their contributions to U.S. civic life are not only acts of citizenship but also of self-definition. When recognised as equal moral agents, they reinforce the plural fabric of American democracy; when misrecognised, they expose the ongoing struggle for visibility and respect that underlies even the most successful immigrant narratives.

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