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Indian Americans Thriving In Connecticut



DR. PRASAD Srinivasan, an allergist, says Indian immigrants have had an easier American experience than other groups have had. (STEPHEN DUNN / HARTFORD COURANT / August 19, 2009)

By JESSE LEAVENWORTH
The Hartford Courant
August 22, 2009

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The typical immigrant story in Connecticut starts with empty pockets and high hopes, segues into years on a factory floor, a rise to the propertied class and a better life for the second generation.

Indian Americans, among the state's latest arrivals, have changed that story. Starting in the 1960s, they came already equipped with college degrees and the ability to speak English. In a relatively short time, these South Asians leap-frogged the struggles of their European counterparts, establishing themselves in the middle and upper reaches of the socioeconomic spectrum.

"The immigrant story, at the end of the day, it might be the same as everybody else, but right now, with the first and second generations, I think it has been a better experience for us than others because the first generation were top-notch professionals," said Dr. Prasad Srinivasan, an allergist with offices in Glastonbury and Hartford.

Indians continue to settle in the state, particularly in communities with reputations for excellent schools. The latest figures from **the U.S. Census** show 37,545 people of Indian origin living in the state, an increase of about 14,000 from 2000. The reasons to move here, Indian Americans say, remain education and opportunity.

"This country is a perfect fit for us because we are willing to work

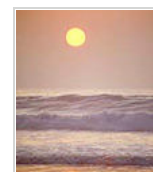
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hard," said Rachna Khanna of South Windsor, a medical office administrator, real estate investor and budding politician.

The tide of immigration from India has slowed a bit, primarily because the Indian economy has improved. But Madhu Reddy, a Glastonbury-based real estate agent, said he sees steady demand from Indian professionals for housing in certain suburbs.

His Indian clients include doctors, engineers and information technology professionals who work for insurance companies. If they are first-time home buyers, they are seeking homes in the \$300,000 to \$350,000 range in communities with reputations for good schools — mainly Glastonbury, South Windsor, Rocky Hill, Farmington and Avon, Reddy said.

He noted that Indian professionals have concentrated in some neighborhoods, including Glastonbury Heights off New London Turnpike in Glastonbury. That trend, Reddy said, will continue in the sought-after towns.

Seeking to create a forum for this growing demographic, Reddy and Sujata Srinivasan, a writer and editor based in Manchester, launched CT Indian Life about two years ago. The quarterly newspaper offers profiles, event listings, stories about domestic violence and other issues and health columns focused on diseases that disproportionately affect Indian Americans.

As a writer for several publications, including The Indian Express, one of India's largest English language dailies, Srinivasan keeps watch on trends in both India and the U.S. Although young Indians are starting to branch out into more varied careers, the draw for them in the U.S. will continue to be science and technology jobs, she said. Among the main employers in Connecticut are insurance companies seeking computer software specialists, Srinivasan said.

Also, she and others say many Indians prefer working in the U.S. because of rampant corruption in India. While this country certainly has shady politicians and bureaucrats, the problem here tends to be at higher levels. In India, Srinivasan and other Indian Americans said, bribery and dirty dealing infest the lowest reaches of government.

Bala Krishnamurthy, CEO of a technology solutions company in Danbury, recalled a recent conversation with her nephew, who is studying for his Ph.D. in the U.S.

"He really loves it here. I asked him what is it that he loves. He said, 'Here, things are cleaner. If you're smart, you can make it. You don't need to bribe people,'" Krishnamurthy said.

Indian Americans also say they have embraced the work ethic in the U.S. Bharat Patel of Rocky Hill arrived in New York City about 30 years ago and worked at newsstands and card and gift shops. For a while, Patel said, he was working 114 hours a week. By saving and borrowing from other Indian Americans — "We help each other," Patel said — he was able to launch his own businesses, including a convenience store in Wallingford. In the past 10 years, Patel has purchased several Subway sandwich shop franchises in the state and a liquor store in Rocky Hill.

Business, however, was not the main reason he moved to Connecticut. Rather, Patel said, he wanted good schools for his two children. Both have graduated from the University of Connecticut — his daughter received a degree in chemistry; his son focused on computer technology.

The emphasis on schooling stems from India's independence in 1947, when higher education began to be heavily subsidized, according to University of Connecticut Professor Bandana Purkayastha.

"Many people from different class backgrounds were able to get elite education," Purkayastha, who teaches sociology and Asian American studies, said in an e-mail. "Middle class Indians learn two or three languages in school routinely ... so the professional credentials and linguistic ability gave them an advantage in finding white collar jobs."

Indian Americans say they concentrate on education as the path to success in America. Reddy says that's the foremost issue when he's showing houses to Indian clients.

"The No. 1 criteria for Indians is the school district," he said.

For many Indian parents, only "A's" are acceptable grades for their children.

"We are horrible. We are mean," said Khanna, who has three daughters. "We decide we are not going to win any popularity contests with our children."

She is a confident, striking woman with ebony hair and a diamond nose stud. A member of the South Windsor Republican Town Committee, Khanna is running for town council in November. One of her priorities is making the town greener, and she points to solar panels that supply much of the power to the offices of her cardiologist husband on West Middle Turnpike in Manchester.

Khanna said she's running for office because she needs to give back to her community. Her father, however, was horrified when she told him she was entering the race. Political campaigns in India, she said, can involve stone-throwing and beatings. She told her father not to worry; things were different in the U.S., at least in South Windsor.

Some Indians have a rougher time assimilating. Some of the more recent arrivals don't speak English well or at all.

"It's loneliness," said Malavika Vidwans, a volunteer for Sneha [www.sneha.org], a South Asian women's support group based in West Hartford. "They don't know the language ... there is no public transport. You need a car. You feel very isolated because you can't connect with the people around you. You go to the supermarket and see 10 different kinds of potatoes and you don't know which one is right."

Also, like other immigrants, some South Asian women who are victims of domestic violence and other crimes fear calling the police and other authorities because they don't want to jeopardize their immigration status, Vidwans, a pathologist who works for a private laboratory in Shelton, said.

Indians also talk about a common weakness in the workplace.

"They are not aggressive enough and don't push back enough," Sujata Srinivasan said. "That stems from the educational culture in India, which is excellent, but you're not encouraged to speak up or question the teacher. That's a stereotype, but when people get together to talk about work, they often mention that."

Another problem: The U.S. government needs to put more money into medical residencies to attract top doctors from India, Prasad Srinivasan said. Still, he said, compared with the immigration experience in other countries — where success is not necessarily based on knowledge and skill — America stands alone.

"The friendliest country to come to is the United States — the country that assimilates you right off the bat," Srinivasan said. "This is not an ideal society, but for us, we cannot tell you how easy it is to become part of mainstream America."

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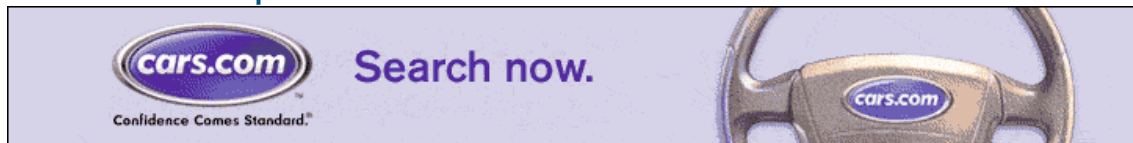
Oh boy...can't wait to see some of the comments on this story!! Good for them. While the halls of Uconn of lined with empty beer kegs from the (Monday) night before, students at the Univ of Bombay are hard at work. I work for a VERY large corporation in Hartford, and once asked my friend (who works in HR at the same place) why so many people from India are hired. She said quite frankly "we hire people with degrees from India over ones here in the U.S. because, quite frankly, they take their studies much more serious, and therefore, the degree means much more, and is more valuable" As an American, you can (almost) take offense to that. BUT, as someone who knows first hand what takes place at Uconn (party 1st, social life 2nd, studies 3rd) you have to agree with her logic. Did you know that they actually hold classes on the weekends as well? While we crashed the local bars, they were planning there move here to the U.S.

Waitforme (08/22/2009, 9:00 AM)

Great for the dots but how about the feathers? The casinos are hurting and along with them all the feathers that rely on that income.

Jack_Gilead (08/22/2009, 6:38 AM)

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