

An “Indian” American Congressman: Dalip Singh Saund’s Indian Heritage and His 1956 Journey to Congress

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On September 27, 2014, an estimated crowd of 19,000 Indian Americans filled Madison Square Garden in New York City.¹ The crowd that assembled were not necessarily NBA fans of the New York Knicks or NHL aficionados of the New York Rangers. Instead, they arrived at the venue for a political event very much out of the ordinary – an address by the then Indian Prime Minister-elect, Narendra Modi. Old and young, Indian-born and U.S. born, the crowd had travelled from all corners of the nation to hear the new Indian Prime Minister speak. Also, among those gathered to see Modi were Senate minority leader Chuck Schumer, and the Democratic senators from New Jersey, Bob Menendez and Cory Booker, but also the then Indian American Republican Governor of South Carolina Nikki Haley and numerous other members of Congress from both sides of the political divide. In India itself, news networks also beamed live coverage of Modi’s speech in Hindi from a revolving platform to Indians across the country from Punjab in the north to Kerala in the south.²

Admittedly a surreal event, Modi’s address in New York City did not just reflect the growing visibility of Indian Americans in the United States. Indeed, Modi’s appearance also highlighted the increasing importance of Indian Americans as a political constituency in U.S. society. Indian Americans constitute less than one percent of the U.S. population, yet the median annual income of Indian-headed households is more than twice that of the U.S. median. Seventy-six percent of Indian immigrants in the country aged twenty-five or older possess at least a bachelor’s degree thus making the immigrant community one of the most educated and affluent in the nation.³ Given Californian Democrat Kamala Harris’s status as the U.S. Vice-President-Elect and the not so distant Bobby Jindal and Haley governorships of two of the nation’s most conservative Southern states, Indian Americans have therefore emerged onto the U.S. political scene as a powerful transnational force. Rudyard Kipling once remarked: “[e]ast is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.”⁴ Yet Modi’s raucous address drawing on politicians, rhetoric and themes from both East and West clearly proved the famed British novelist and poet wrong.

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¹ “At Madison Square Garden, Chants, Cheers and Roars for Modi,” *The New York Times*, September 28, 2014.

² Sangay K. Mishra, *Desis Divided: The Political Lives of South Asian Americans* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 1.

³ “Indian immigrants make it obvious that the American dream is alive and well,” *The Washington Post*, August 24, 2015.

⁴ “The Ballad of East and West” (1889) featured in Rudyard Kipling, *Rudyard Kipling’s Verse: Definitive Edition* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1940), 234-38.

However, the political potential and visibility of Indian Americans within the United States was not always like this. Indeed, when Judge Dalip Singh Saund became the Democratic Representative for California's 29th district in 1956, he became the first Asian American and first member from a non-Abrahamic faith ever elected to Congress. In an electoral district which had never before sent a Democrat to Congress, Saund won thanks to a margin of roughly 3,000 votes from a total of 110,000 cast.⁵ The stature of his Republican opponent Jacqueline Cochran Odlum made Saund's stunning electoral victory all the more impressive. A world-renowned aviatrix, Odlum had won numerous prizes for her feats, had marshalled female fliers during the Second World War, and had married the multi-millionaire financier, Floyd Odlum. As reporter Richard Dyer MacCann noted: "[s]elf-made woman vs. naturalized Sikh – certainly this has never happened before in American politics."⁶ Furthermore, Odlum was a Caucasian.

Four years earlier, Saund had achieved prominence through winning the Justice of the Peace election in his hometown of Westmorland in California's Imperial County by a mere thirteen votes.⁷ Again, the incumbent whom Saund defeated was Caucasian. More than half a century before the appearance of Indian American politicians such as Harris, Haley, or Jindal on the national U.S. political scene, Saund's electoral successes were as remarkable as they were improbable. One of seven children born to illiterate parents in 1899, Saund's journey to the upper echelons of U.S. political power certainly deserves further examination. Indeed, how did Saund's Indian heritage feature in his successful journey to Congress in 1956? Using material from Saund's memoir and media coverage of Saund's campaigns, I will explain in this paper how Saund managed to achieve electoral success despite his status as a naturalized U.S. citizen of Indian origin. I argue that his outward appearance as an amenable, educated, and canny politician who embodied U.S. values helped Saund achieve political success despite the significant obstacle posed by his Indian heritage.

Given national attitudes towards immigration at the time Saund arrived in the United States, his later successes are even more remarkable. Saund's story was certainly not one of the standard rags-to-riches lore. While his parents may have been illiterate, they were well-off agriculturalists from Amritsar in the Punjab and were able to provide for Saund's U.S. education.⁸ Yet Saund arrived for graduate study at the University of California, Berkeley a mere three years after the nation had passed the 1917 Immigration Act. Creating a "Pacific Barred Zone," the Act severely restricted the admission of Asians to the United States and further declared individuals of Asian descent ineligible for U.S. citizenship. Historian David Gerber notes how "frustrated efforts at piecemeal proscription of Asian immigration and citizenship" finally resulted in the 1917 Act which

⁵ Dalip S. Saund, *Congressman from India* (New York: E.P. Dutton and Company, 1960), 98.

⁶ "Democracy Seen in Action," *The Christian Science Monitor*, May 16, 1956.

⁷ Saund, *Congressman from India*, 83.

⁸ "First India Native Goes to Congress," *The Atlanta Constitution*, November 11, 1956.

“declar[ed] all of Asia, exclusive of the Philippines... ‘the barred Asiatic zone,’ from which immigration must cease completely.”⁹

Indian demographer Sripati Chandrasekhar highlighted the two ways in which the 1917 Act especially affected those of Indian descent. He claimed firstly that “the United States Government, having discriminated against two important countries, China and Japan, did not wish these countries to feel that they had been singled out for discrimination, and so they added India and the rest [other Asian nations] for fairness!” According to Chandrasekhar, the second justification involved Britain’s relationship with the U.S. since there was the concern that “any national of [Britain’s] colonial empire in Asia, and particularly the educated and articulate Indians, if admitted to the U.S. would certainly carry-on propaganda against British rule.”¹⁰

Despite the tough immigration rhetoric in the years which preceded his arrival in the U.S., Saund had nevertheless developed an affectionate fascination with the United States while still in India. Scholar Rajni Srikanth writes that “Asian Americans have a more urgent reason to exhibit interest in their ancestral nations, however: they never know when their membership in the United States will be called into question.”¹¹ Yet for Saund, the primary interest was never in his ancestral country of India but rather in his adopted U.S. homeland. He admitted that he had first developed his own notions of who constituted an American and what constituted American values while still a college student in the Punjab. He wrote: “I must confess as late as 1917, when I was a junior in college, despite my interest in political affairs, my knowledge of the United States of America was next to nothing.”¹² Yet this began to change when the U.S. entered the First World War.

Following U.S. attempts to create a League of Nations in the aftermath of the conflict, Saund started reading the speeches of President Woodrow Wilson in Indian newspapers. He noted how “[Wilson’s] inspiring ideas and ideals – ‘make the world safe for democracy’, ‘the war to end war,’ and ‘self-determination for all peoples’ – appealed to my young heart.”¹³ Through his engagement with Wilson’s oratory, Saund further became acquainted with the words of Abraham Lincoln. The discovery of Lincoln and his role in U.S. history changed the direction of Saund’s life. He remarked: “Lincoln changed the entire course of my life.” He added: “[d]efiant of the wishes of my parents, who wanted me to join the service of the British Government in India, I said to myself and to them, I must go to the United States of America, come what may.”¹⁴

⁹ David A. Gerber, *American Immigration: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 32. The Philippines remained a U.S. possession until 1946 following the conclusion of the Spanish-American War of 1898.

¹⁰ Sripati Chandrasekhar, *From India to America: A Brief History of Immigration, Problems of Discrimination, Admission and Assimilation* (La Jolla, California: Population Review Publications, 1982), 18.

¹¹ Rajini Srikanth, *The World Next Door: South Asian American Literature and the Idea of America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004), 51.

¹² Saund, *Congressman from India*, 31.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Saund, *Congressman from India*, 31.

Coming to Berkeley in 1920 to study viticulture, Saund quickly saw how erroneously the U.S. viewed India and those of Indian descent and so he started the process of adapting to what he believed the U.S. wanted of new arrivals like him. Author Vivek Bald noted that “[t]oday, when we think of U.S. fads and fashions for India, we tend to focus on the recent mass popularity of yoga and Bollywood films or on narratives of self-discovery in the East such as Elizabeth Gilbert’s best-selling *Eat, Pray Love*.” Yet Bald notes that “[i]t is largely forgotten that at the turn of the twentieth century the United States was in the grips of a craze over India and ‘the Orient’ that was, in some ways, larger and more pervasive than anything that has occurred since.”¹⁵ Indeed, Saund himself observed that “[i]n those days the picture of India which most of the American people carried in their minds had little basis in reality...It was a confused jumble of yogis, snake charmers, and maharajas.”¹⁶

Yet, despite the romantic depictions and imaginations of India, Saund knew that prejudice against Asians was intense, and that those of Asian descent were unwelcome. He realized that to become accepted in U.S. society, he needed to act and behave as a “true American.” He wrote: “I vowed to myself that if I was going to acquire any of the characteristics of the American people, one of the most important ones would be to learn to be a good sport.”¹⁷ Only then, he believed, would others in the U.S. come to accept him as an American who happened to be of Indian descent rather than an Indian who happened to reside in the United States.

Once on the path to becoming an American “good sport,” Saund still had one formidable obstacle to overcome. Finishing his graduate degrees at Berkeley, Saund became intimately familiar with U.S. life. Yet he had not managed to achieve U.S. citizenship. As a non-citizen, Saund faced the same problems experienced by countless other South Asians who had immigrated to the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Journalist Kathryn Schulz describes the similar citizenship struggle of Pathan tamale seller Zarif Khan who had his U.S. citizenship revoked a mere four months after obtaining it in 1926 on the realization that he had fallen foul of the 1917 Act.¹⁸ Saund himself lamented: “I had married an American [Caucasian] girl, and was the father of three American children I was making America my home.” He continued: “thus it was only natural that I felt very uncomfortable not being able to become a citizen of the United States.”¹⁹

In fact, it was only after the U.S. had come to terms with the efforts of non-citizen minority communities to the U.S. effort during the Second World War did citizenship restrictions change. Only July 2, 1946, President Truman eventually passed the Immigration Act of 1946 which, according to Chandrasekhar, for the first time authorized “the admission into the United States

¹⁵ Vivek Bald, *Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2013), 16. [Emphasis original].

¹⁶ Saund, *Congressman from India*, 40.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁸ “Citizen Khan,” *The New Yorker*, June 2016. Khan finally regained his citizenship twenty-eight years later in 1954.

¹⁹ Saund, *Congressman from India*, 72.

of persons or races indigenous to India...to make them racially eligible for naturalization and other purposes.”²⁰ Following the passing of the 1946 Act, as many as 3,000 Indians who had been resident in the United States became U.S. citizens.²¹ Indeed, Saund finally became a U.S. citizen himself three years after the passing of this Act and twenty-nine years after he first arrived in the United States.²²

Receiving his doctorate in Mathematics from Berkeley, Saund had moved to the town of Westmorland in California’s Imperial County. Marrying Marian Kosa, the daughter of a Los Angeles painter of Czech origin, Saund began raising alfalfa and sugar beet in the Imperial Valley.²³ There, the Justice of the Peace, who happened to be a close friend, drew Saund into local Democratic Party affairs. Having fulfilled U.S. citizenship residency requirements and become wealthy through his agricultural enterprises, Saund contested this judicial post following the death of his friend in 1952. Here began Saund’s first electoral battle and the first time where his Indian heritage was seriously called into question. He remembered an exchange he had with a friend who advised him against becoming the town’s Justice of the Peace. To emphasize his point, Saund’s friend informed him: “[w]ell you’re kind of an American I suppose, but I can trace my own origin to a family that came over on the *Mayflower*.”²⁴ Another resident attacked him asking “Doc, tell us, if you’re elected, will you furnish the turbans or will we have to buy them ourselves in order to come into your court?”²⁵ Another town dweller remarked: “I agree that Saund would make a good judge, but I just can’t go for a Hindu for a judge.” While that particular Westmorland resident did not vote for him, Saund later learned that ten younger members of his family did.²⁶

The traces of the prejudice and discrimination that had fuelled the implementation of the 1917 Act remained among the older generation, but Saund noticed how they were largely absent among those from the younger generation. For the latter, Saund’s actions and good works in the town community held much more weight than his ethnic or racial origins. Saund noted how in the run-up to the election, he had worked in support of Community Chest drives and the Boy Scouts and had also acted as the chairman of the March for Dimes for two years. He further described how he had been appointed as the chairman of a drive to complete a swimming pool for the town. While covering his Congressional race four years later, several media outlets noted how he had successfully helped the town to dispel its associations with gambling and prostitution.²⁷ His reputation as an educated man had also begun to precede him with the townsfolk affectionately referring to him as “Doc.” His responses to racists such as “I don’t care what a

²⁰ Chandrasekhar, *From India to America*, 22.

²¹ “Hindu Is Trying to Ground Jackie Cochran at The Polls,” *The Courier-Journal*, May 9, 1956.

²² Saund, *Congressman from India*, 76.

²³ “Jackie Cochran Vies for Votes with a Hindu,” *Detroit Free Press*, May 6, 1956.

²⁴ Saund, *Congressman from India*, 80. [Emphasis original].

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ “A Sikh in Congress: Dalip Singh Saund,” *The New York Times*, November 10, 1956; “Jackie Cochran Vies for Votes with a Hindu,” *Detroit Free Press*, May 6, 1956.

man has on top of his head All I'm interested in is what he's got inside it", all helped his personality and charm appeal to voters rather than his Indian heritage.²⁸

Saund's decision to contest the 1956 Congressional election for California's 29th district again played host to discussions regarding his Indian background. In the district's Democratic primary, Saund's opponent repeatedly racially attacked him yet Saund refused to acknowledge the assaults against his character. He wrote: "I had positively and definitely made up my mind to present myself as a candidate for the high office of congressman on my own merits and not say a word against my opponent." He added: "I thus never felt the need nor the desire to answer his charges." His Democratic challenger Carl Kegley even unsuccessfully took Saund to court in his belief that Saund did not meet the citizenship requirements to run for the seat.²⁹ Saund trusted that the district's constituents would judge his candidacy based on his work as Westmoreland's Justice of the Peace rather than his Asian or immigrant background. Securing the Democratic nomination, he noted that the results "have confirmed my faith in the good sense and fair play on the part of the American people."³⁰

Yet, defeating Kegley did not make the seat race any easier. Following the retirement of the district's seven-term Republican congressman John Phillips, Saund indeed faced an uphill, often race-based battle to secure the seat. Campaigning against Odlum, Saund noted: "[e]very effort was made to make it appear that I was an Indian, not an American In newspaper ads I was not called D.S. Saund, but Dalip Singh in big letters and Saund in small letters."³¹ Furthermore, Odlum, a personal friend of President Eisenhower, had a well-financed campaign. Saund had struggled to find any rich supporters for his cause. Despite lacking in financial clout, he nevertheless managed a campaign built on strong volunteer support and ingenuity. Priced out of buying commercial billboards, his campaign furnished their own homemade plywood billboards. Scores of volunteers canvassed the towns and cities in the district for Saund. Family members campaigning on his behalf also worked wonders for Saund with many constituents deciding to vote for him after meeting them. Furthermore, campaigning in a largely agricultural and conservative rural district, Saund advocated for federal aid for farmers, regional water rights and higher pay for the armed forces.³² This hard work coupled with his own farming background helped Saund reap benefits which overcame his campaign's financial struggles.

Saund had always tried to deflect attention away from his Indian heritage. Yet he eventually realized that his ethnic and racial background could be used as an instrument to definitively prove his assimilation into U.S. society. Scholar Seema Sohi writes that "[t]he experiences of Indian workers, intellectuals, and students as they moved across the globe [enabled them] to see themselves not simply as migrants seeking economic opportunity."³³ Sohi argues that many of

²⁸ Saund, *Congressman from India*, 80-82.

²⁹ "Appellate Court Refuses to Act in Election Case," *Los Angeles Times*, April 27, 1956.

³⁰ "Aviatrix and Hindi Win Nominations," *The Hartford Courant*, June 7, 1956.

³¹ Saund, *Congressman from India*, 101-102.

³² "First India Native Goes to Congress," *The Atlanta Constitution*, November 11, 1956.

³³ Seema Sohi, *Echoes of Mutiny: Race, Surveillance, and Indian Anticolonialism In North America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 16.

these Indians actively became involved “as politicized workers” who were determined to make their own impact on the political systems in the nations to which they migrated. Saund certainly declared himself first and foremost to be working for the best interests of his constituents. He remembered how Odlum dragged Indian Prime Minister Nehru into the election by claiming that he was a Communist-sympathizer and “would certainly like to have a man from India elected to the Congress of the United States.”³⁴ According to Saund, he replied to her that: “I was presenting myself to the people of the 29th Congressional District as an American candidate for Congress and not as anyone owing allegiance to any foreign country.”³⁵

Saund further promised to his constituents that if he were to be elected, one of the first items on his agenda would be to travel to India and the Middle East to showcase the wonders of U.S. democracy.³⁶ Once there, he pledged to appear before the appeal and claim: “[y]ou have been listening to the insidious propaganda of the Communists that there is prejudice and discrimination in the United States against your people.” Saund believed that his election would prove to ordinary Asians that he was a “living example of American democracy in action” as would be “elected by the free vote of the people in a very conservative district of the state of California to membership in the most powerful legislative body on earth.”³⁷ For Saund, his Indian heritage thus had the potential to function not just as a marker of his national and racial origins but also as a reminder of the distance he had covered on his path to assimilation in U.S. society.

Saund’s vigorous campaign paid off. Narrowly defeating Odlum, he took office as the Democratic congressman from California’s 29th district in January 1957. Authors Sanjoy Chakravorty, Devesh Kapur, and Nirvikar Singh wrote that “[h]aving worked as a farmer in the Imperial Valley, [Saund] understood the daily lives of his neighbours.”³⁸ Covering the elections, *The Minneapolis Morning Tribune* noted how “Saund appears to be on first name terms with half the people in Imperial County Because of his dark skin, he has a natural appeal to the region’s Negroes, Mexicans, Japanese, and Hindus” who together formed around three percent of the total electorate.³⁹ Marrying the daughter of Czech immigrants and serving in local civic organizations, Saund had also formed several bonds with the majority of the Caucasians in his town and California county. He had managed to use his Indian heritage to highlight how despite his foreign origins, he remained committed to improving the lives and welfare of those in the country where he became a naturalized citizen. His candidacy as a hard-working, personable, and educated Democrat in a Republican stronghold appeared to matter much more than his Indian national origins.

³⁴ Saund, *Congressman from India*, 108.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ “Jackie Cochran Vies for Votes with a Hindu,” *Detroit Free Press*, May 6, 1956.

³⁷ Saund, *Congressman from India*, 108-110.

³⁸ Sanjoy Chakravorty, Devesh Kapur, and Nirvikar Singh, *The Other One Percent: Indians In America* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 20.

³⁹ “Hindu Battles Woman Flier in California Congress Race,” *The Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, May 6, 1956.

Despite Saund's election to Congress in 1956, his victory did not immediately pave the way for other Indian Americans to join Congress. Indeed, it would be another forty-eight years before Bobby Jindal took his place in Congress as a Representative from Louisiana. Like Saund, Jindal again had to overcome obstacles based on his ethnic and racial origins to appeal to his electorate. Jindal had converted from his family's Hinduism to Roman Catholicism, but even religious conversion did not prevent him from facing questions over his "Americanness."⁴⁰ However, in recent years, Indian American politicians have become more comfortable in publicly embracing their various ethnic and religious origins. Today, both Rep. Ro Khanna and Rep. Pramila Jayapal play a key role in fostering dialogue between India and the U.S. through the Congressional India Caucus, and Vice-President-Elect Harris has even publicly cooked Indian food with Indian American celebrity Mindy Kaling while out on the campaign trail.⁴¹ Saund may have broken ground in becoming the first Indian American Congressman, but it is only now that the wider American public can begin to see and indeed appreciate the national role of Indian American politicians in representing them. Indeed, the raucous welcome afforded to Modi at a packed-out Madison Square Garden in 2014 highlights the important position of Indian Americans in U.S. political life today.

Referencing his heritage, Saund was correct when he lamented: "I have found it impossible to malign or belittle my opponents."⁴² Almost half a century before Indian Americans began playing a larger role in U.S. politics, Saund was able to legitimize himself as a regular U.S. citizen who simply happened to come from an Indian background due to his work as a determined politician with an established track record in his community. One of the statements of Abraham Lincoln that most appealed to Saund was his advice: "[b]e satisfied with skim milk if you cannot get cream."⁴³ Saund certainly was forced to live with skim milk on several occasions throughout his life, yet he had managed to find it both sweet and nourishing. Kipling may have remarked that East could never meet West. Through his journey from Punjab to California and Washington, Saund decisively proved him wrong.

⁴⁰ "Must Sikhs, Hindus convert to get elected," *National Catholic Reporter*, July 2010

⁴¹ "Ro Khanna named Democratic vice chair of Congressional India Caucus," *The Hindu*, December 2020; "Idli with 'really good Sambar', 'any kind of Tikka' favourite Indian dishes: Kamala Harris," *The Indian Express*, November 2020

⁴² Saund, *Congressman from India*, vi.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, v.

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