

## 'Desi' voices strengthen in South Bay

Carla Marinucci

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A generation of Baby Boomers remembers the Bay Area's powerhouse AM station KLOK 1170 as home to classic American Top 40 hits - but that was before it became a new powerhouse for a new America.

The oldies playlist at the San Jose station - which now is 50,000-watt "Desi 1170 AM," the largest Indian American radio station in the nation - has morphed into a spicy menu of Bollywood music and lively discussions on world news, gossip and politics that flip from Hindi to English.

New Delhi-born Shreeja Sharna, host of the station's morning drive time, said she was unprepared for the numbers of her fellow "desi" immigrants from India and the rest of South Asia who have put down roots in the South Bay and are flexing their political and economic muscle.

Sharna laughingly recalls her reaction to Silicon Valley when she arrived five years ago via Dubai and Toronto: "Am I really outside of India? There seemed to be Indians here everywhere."

Yogi Chugh, a planning commissioner in Fremont and former national president of the Indian American Forum for Political Education, said the fast-growing community that arrived in waves of immigration in the 1980s has secured footholds in the tech economy and increasingly in the politics of their adopted state.

### Embracing their role

Indian Americans are expanding their resumes beyond business - to being political and civic leaders - because they understand "that becoming a U.S. citizen is a huge responsibility - and they embrace it," he added.

Indian Americans have founded 13 percent of startups in Silicon Valley and nearly 7 percent of them nationwide, according to research by Stanford and UC Berkeley, Forbes reported.

"We can be tough entrepreneurs," Chugh said, "maybe because we know what it's like to come from a place where so many live on the edge." He emigrated from New Delhi to the valley as a teenager in 1981 and now is managing director of S5 Advisory, a corporate real estate firm.

Angel investor Anil Godhwani, who also grew up in Delhi and came here in the 1980s, agreed that the Bay Area's South Asians are "into their second generation in this country. And it has sunk in: This is home."

Godhwani, a former director at Netscape who is CEO of SimplyHired, helped found the India Community Center in Milpitas, which has generated "a focused wave of people wanting to get involved" in making a mark on their communities, he said.

### Big demographic shift

The wave is huge: The San Jose metropolitan region has the highest percentage of desi immigrants in the nation - 6.8 percent - according to the 2010 census. Several cities in the area have far higher concentrations, including Cupertino, headquarters of Apple, where nearly one-third of residents have South Asian roots.

The demographic shift in the heart of California's tech capital has made the Bay Area's South Asians - largely from India but also from Pakistan and Bangladesh - "an under-recognized force in politics," said Democratic political consultant Dan Newman.

Silicon Valley, home to other tech giants including Yahoo, eBay, Cisco and Google, represents "a regional epicenter for that force," Newman said.

Newman's San Francisco firm, SCN Strategies, advised one star of that community - California Attorney General Kamala Harris. One of the nation's highest-ranking Indian Americans, Harris' mother is Indian-born breast cancer specialist Dr. Shyamala Gopalan, and her father is Stanford University economics Professor Donald Harris, a Jamaican American.

### Testing political waters

Former Obama trade representative and author Ro Khanna, the son of Indian immigrants, predicts a new era for the entrepreneurial Indian American community, which he said "helped transform Silicon Valley."

"I have no doubt that the Indian American community will advance a pro-growth economic agenda and help bring fresh ideas and energy

to Washington," Khanna said.

There's speculation that Khanna is eyeing that route. The Fremont resident, 35, is mulling a run against a fellow Democrat, Rep. Mike Honda, 71, in the South Asian stronghold of the 17th Congressional District, which stretches from Fremont to Milpitas and Sunnyvale.

The contest not only would test the political power of Indian Americans - but also would pit a Japanese American incumbent, one of the House's most liberal members, against a young tech leader from the South Asian community, which tends to be fiscally conservative and socially moderate.

In 2012, Ami Bera, an Elk Grove (Sacramento County) physician, became the only South Asian in the House of Representatives when the Democrat defeated incumbent Rep. Dan Lungren, a Republican.

Indian Americans voted overwhelmingly Democratic in last year's election and emerged as major donors. They turned out in force for President Obama's roundtable fundraisers in the Bay Area - making up 80 percent of attendees at some events, where tickets went for as much as \$40,000 per person, insiders said.

San Francisco Republican Party chair Harmeet Dhillon, a devout Sikh who emigrated as a child from Chandigarh, the capital of Punjab, acknowledged that her party "has left those votes on the table."

### Looking to the future

She is running for vice chair of the state GOP in a quest to be the first woman in that position, taking her campaign to dozens of South Asian communities around the state. She has won support from small-business owners, farmers and tech community leaders with talk about "lower regulation, reasonable immigration policy and socially conservative values."

Radio host Sharna, the mother of a 7-year-old child, said South Asians in the Bay Area care deeply about another key issue that shapes their futures - and those of their children.

"Education is our emphasis," she said. "That is one of the strongest reasons for us doing well outside our country."

The new generation of South Asians learns from their immigrant parents that in America, along with a new culture and new opportunities, "you get an education and you go to college," she said. "You don't have a choice."

### South Asians

The California cities with the highest percentage of South Asian residents are in the Bay Area and Central Valley, while San Jose has the highest concentration of Indian Americans of any metropolitan area in the United States, at 6.8 percent:

**Cupertino:** 32.6%

**Fremont:** 18.1%

**Sunnyvale:** 15.5%

**Livingston:** 15%

**Santa Clara:** 13.6%

**Yuba City:** 13.7%

**San Ramon:** 11.3%

Source: 2010 U.S. Census

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