



A Better Life? Desi Voters, COVID-19, and the 2020 Election

South Asians are gaining political power in New Jersey, but staying united is a growing challenge.

Ad Break

Zahir Janmohamed: I'm Zahir Janmohamed, and this is A Better Life?...a podcast from Feet in 2 Worlds about the impact of Covid-19 on immigrants.

In this week's episode, we're taking you to New Jersey, a state with a large and growing Indian population.

Clip: [Sounds from the Ganesh festival.](#)

Zahir: Those are the sounds of the annual Ganesh Festival in Jersey City, a celebration of the Hindu god Ganesh, as captured by Zee TV. In the last decade, New Jersey's Indian population grew by 38%, according to data from [AAPI Vote](#). In the [2010 census](#), New Jersey recorded more Indian Americans per capita than any other state.

Sabeena Singhani is a journalist who was born in New York City and raised in northern New Jersey. She's also a Feet in 2 Worlds' 2020 fellow, covering South Asian immigrants and the election. Hi, Sabeena. Tell us what you've been reporting on.

Sabeena Singhani: Hey Zahir, thanks for having me. At Feet in 2 Worlds, I've been focused on learning more about elections in New Jersey, and so I've been looking at the growing South Asian population. By South Asians, I mean people with their roots in India, as well as Pakistan and Bangladesh. There are about [a million Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, or AAPIs, in New Jersey](#).

Northern New Jersey actually has the biggest concentration of these South Asians. This makes a lot of sense due to its proximity to New York City. You know, reflecting on my own parents' story...you know, they lived in Queens for about 20 years before leaving the city and having this, kind of, suburban dream.

Zahir: Can we call this episode the Desi invasion? [Laughs.] There's all these, like, clubs called Desi invasion and stuff, like, it's so cheesy, you know?

Sabeena: I don't know if you're part of Subtle Curry Traits on Facebook.

...but that's kind of amazing. You know, also according to recent data, we're seeing that [AAPI voters, eligible voters in New Jersey grew by 23% from 2012 to 2018](#). While the — you know in New Jersey as a whole, the eligible voter population grew about 3%. So that is a huge, dramatic shift. Um, and that's why Indian Americans and South Asian Americans are going to matter this election cycle.

Zahir: Um, so I know that New Jersey had a very painful history of Dotbusters, dot referring to the bindis that South Asian — Desi women — sometimes wear on their forehead.

So [Dotbusters was a hate group in Jersey City that attacked and threatened Indians, mostly Hindus in the 1980s](#), the late 1980s, um, particularly Hindu women who wore the dot, uh, the bindi, on their forehead. Um, so they called themselves Dotbusters. “Dotbusting” is actually kind of a term that sometimes you'll see, like, I know, like, Desi DJs called themselves, like, “DJ Dot Buster” because it's kind of been reclaimed. But dotbusting sort of still has a very painful history. And this is a group that actually went out and targeted people.

Sabeena: Right. So I think it's moments like those in New Jersey history that sparked engagement among other Indian-Americans in the state. You know, more recently in Basking Ridge, New Jersey, a mosque wasn't built for many years due to pushback in the town. So I think that the state has a history of rejection, right? Of South Asians, although they're growing so rapidly. I mean, [Asian Americans are the fastest growing racial group in the U.S.](#)

Zahir: So now, tell me — what are some of the races and who are some of the people you're excited about in 2020?

Sabeena: In November, we have Rik Mehta, an Indian pharmaceutical entrepreneur, and he's running as a Republican. He's challenging Democratic incumbent U.S. Senator Cory Booker. And Booker, as you may remember, ran unsuccessfully for the Democratic presidential nomination. But he has such a large following — an almost cult following.

Uh, Booker is African American. Rik Mehta is the first Republican person of color to run, uh, for U.S. Senate in New Jersey. And Mehta actually won the Republican primary in July against another Indian American, Hirsh Singh. Mehta only won by about two percentage points. So that was a really incredible race to watch. I think it really underscored the growing influence and growing confidence of Indians — and South Asians just generally — in New Jersey politics.

So I actually got to speak to Rik Mehta while he was driving around Morris County — near where he lives, uh which is pretty close to New York City, like 36 miles. And he was knocking on doors and handing out campaign literature.

Rik Mehta: Good, good. I'm actually just driving around on the campaign trail, so different places. So yeah, just bear with me, I'm just driving right now.

Sabeena: We talked via Whatsapp, because COVID-19 didn't allow me to ride along. Dropping flyers at voters' houses is actually one of the outreach activities that's endured during the coronavirus.

Rik: This pandemic has changed campaigning, has turned it on its head.

Sabeena: Absolutely.

Rik: Obviously, you know, every campaign is taking caution, into, you know, proper risk mitigation efforts. So whether it's wearing a mask or social distancing, we've been doing outreach in Zoom.

Sabeena: The pandemic has created challenges for campaigns across the country. With fewer public events, candidates have a hard time connecting with voters. People with unstable Internet connections and those who have trouble using technology may be overlooked. You know, but Rik Mehta, who's running against a well-funded and popular incumbent, says virtual campaigning has some advantages too.

Rik: That's kind of helped to, actually, help to get the message out, whereas traditional campaigning, uh, may require more money than, you know, your digital campaigning.

Sabeena: Sure.

Sabeena: Even before the pandemic, campaigns were not doing a very good job of reaching Asian American voters. In 2018, a [survey](#) found that as many as half of Asian Americans in the U.S. had not been contacted by the Democratic party. And the Republican party had an even worse record.

Mehta's campaign has organized a series of virtual events, aimed specifically at Indian voters.

Rik: And actually, we have a bunch lined up in the Indian community, we've, uh, seen a handful of people start to turn out for them. My father's in the seventies and he has no problems turning it on. And that goes the same with my seven-year-old. We do virtual prayers, uh, every evening at seven thirty and my son goes on his computer, turns it on, um, and is able to do the broadcast from the temple.

Reema Mehta: [Hi everyone. Last week, we got our ballot for the Republican party primary...](#)

Sabeena: That's Rik Mehta's wife, Reema Mehta, in a Facebook video, demonstrating how to vote by mail.

Reema: ...and today I'm here with my oldest son, Shaelyn Mehta...who's gonna help me cast our vote for my husband, Rik Mehta, for United States Senate.

Sabeena: Now, even though Mehta's campaign is showing voters how to vote by mail, in our discussion, he seemed skeptical of the process. He echoes President Trump, who has claimed that voting by mail leads to voter fraud.

In New Jersey, because of COVID-19 this year, all registered voters are being sent a vote-by-mail ballot prior to Election Day. There is in-person voting, but it's limited to provisional ballots, or paper ballots.

Other measures have been built in to safeguard against voter fraud. Only those with specific disabilities will be permitted to use voting machines. With non-essential businesses, indoor dining, and gyms now open in New Jersey, Rik Mehta is among those who believe a vote-by-mail election is not what New Jerseyans need.

Rik: We really should be focused on risk mitigation efforts, um, and getting back to some kind of new normalcy rather than focusing on extremes, you know.

Sabeena: Right. Right.

Rik: And I think that a lot of it is partisan. Forcing us to vote by mail, while you can go to cash registers at big box stores really didn't make sense to me — really didn't make sense to a lot of people. And that's not a Republican thing.

Sabeena: Mehta focuses on many of the issues that Trump highlights — such as immigration, COVID-19 guidelines, and voting by mail.

It's interesting to see Mehta run as a Republican. He used to be a Democrat, as recently as 2012. And Indian Americans, of all South Asians, most strongly identify with the Democratic party. They turn out for elections more than their Bangladeshi and Pakistani counterparts.

But newly-minted Republican Rik Mehta isn't alone. In a survey done by APIA Vote, [28% of Indian Americans](#) in the U.S. said they were inclined to vote for Trump in November.

Clip: [President Trump: "Ab ki baar Trump Sarkaar. We love the Hindus."](#)

Sabeena: That's Trump, speaking garbled Hindi in a 2016 campaign ad. What he's trying to say is: "Now it's time for Trump's government."

Mehta's alignment with Trump on immigration issues comes directly from his family's story.

Rik: My dad, when he came here, was the eldest in his family. Um, he had come here to truly live the American dream. Um, he came here as a researcher to go to school and, you know, complete his Masters. He flew into JFK, took the bus to Scranton, opened up a phone book, looked for an Indian-sounding name.

And they took him in because there weren't, you know, it was a small community at the time, and that story is really the story of many, many people in New Jersey, but one third of us, um, are immigrants coming from somewhere, whether you're Italian American, Colombian American, Puerto Rican American, you know, Somalian American, Indian American.

Sabeena: Yep.

Rik: It doesn't matter, that story is the same.

Sabeena: One of Mehta's criticisms of the Democratic party is what he perceives to be their views on immigration.

Rik: And for some reason, the Democrats have painted a picture that they only support, you know, I'd say maybe less than 1% of immigrants that are illegal immigrants, which I think is offensive to many of us that have had to work hard. My parents that have come here, ehm, through the legal process.

Sabeena: Immigrant solidarity is prevalent in the South Asian community, but Mehta's candidacy has highlighted divisions.

S. Nadia Hussain: So when you spoke with Rik Mehta, and he talked about Republican values and Democratic values...any values that both parties expound have been overtaken by sensationalist chasing of, like, the next crazy thing.

Zahir: We'll be back with more on South Asian politics in New Jersey. Stay with us.

Ad Break

Zahir: This is A Better Life? from Feet in 2 Worlds. I'm Zahir Janmohamed.

So we were chatting with Sabeena Singhani about Rik Mehta's run for Senate as an Indian-American on the Republican ticket, as well as the history of South Asians politically in New Jersey.

Sabeena, is Mehta's vision for the state resonating with other South Asians in New Jersey?

Sabeena: You know, Zahir, there are many visions for South Asians in New Jersey. Mehta's is just one. And it includes "[a legislative package that establishes who is permitted to enter the U.S.](#)" Other South Asian political leaders and community activists in New Jersey actually take a more expansive view of immigration, including advocating for the rights of undocumented immigrants.

Immigration is just one issue on which there is disagreement. Even so, South Asians — many of whom are immigrants, or like me, the child of immigrants — are in the political spotlight this year, more than ever. And as South Asian political influence grows, so does the awareness that this is not a monolithic community.

One person who works with and understands the complexities of the community is S. Nadia Hussain. She helps run the Bangladeshi American Women's Development Initiative — or BAWDI for short.

S. Nadia: Sorry, one second. I'm going to go to a quieter room. [Inaudible.] Sorry, one second, you're, like, tucked into my armpit.

Sabeena: When we spoke, of course, there was a Desi mom in the background asking if she's eaten.

S. Nadia: We have been very active during COVID, doing emergency fundraising, of, uh, like, rental assistance and dropping off food to Bangladeshi families in Paterson, New Jersey, and also assisting others in the state as well.

Sabeena: Besides organizing for COVID-19 relief, Hussain stays engaged in local politics. And she pushes back on Mehta's usage of the word "values."

S. Nadia: When you spoke with Rik Mehta, and he talked about Republican values and Democratic values. Maybe for the last few years, but definitely as of late, any values that both parties expound have been overtaken by sensationalist, kind of, chasing of, like, the next crazy thing.

That's been kind of cycling in this country anyway...so our values that we say are either Democrat or Republican values at this point. I'm like, it's almost kind of moot, because we're not driving ourselves on values anymore.

Sabeena: I asked her what she thought about politicians' efforts to reach Bangladeshi voters in New Jersey.

S. Nadia: Regardless of who's reaching out, I think the criticism sometimes does come that you want — not you meaning the Biden campaign, but for politicians — that you kind of want our feedback, you want to meet with us, but a lot of times it's to convince us about your platform, instead of you asking us to help shape your platform. Or you asking us, and then that doesn't even go anywhere, like, or it's not really included. There are definite divisions, right? So not only are there class divisions, but with religion. So for example, Narendra Modi, and what's been happening in India? Now that's happening over there, right? In India. But it's something that a lot of people who are immigrants here care about. There are a lot of ties to Hindu national groups.

Sabeena: Religion has been a source of political tension and political violence in India for decades. Sometimes those tensions show up among Indians who have immigrated to the U.S. The BJP is India's ruling political party. And under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, [the BJP has enacted controversial legislation, making it harder for Muslims to achieve Indian citizenship.](#)

With Muslims targeted by Hindu nationalist policy, Indian-Americans with ties back home may bring their support of Modi with them. Plus, Modi and Donald Trump have a history together. [Both have praised one another publicly.](#)

Clip: [Prime Minister Narendra Modi: "My friend, India's friend...the President of the United States of America...Mr. Donald Trump!"](#)

S. Nadia: That is very unnerving for a lot of Muslim Americans, especially South Asian Muslim Americans, especially Indian South Asian Muslim Americans. And it also brings up generational trauma. It's, it's very, it runs very deep, right? It's a very, it's very heavy. Um, and so, seeing, like, who is supporting that, but then also supporting a Democrat, but then some Democrats support Narendra Modi and other others don't or some do, but are quiet about it.

Sabeena: Okay, it's complicated. These complications clearly run deep, beginning with history before my time and continuing on into present day, from India to New Jersey.

And these complications, while they have always existed, are now more visible than ever — forced into the open by a variety of developments. There's the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on Asian Americans. Then there's the Trump Administration's new effort to restrict H1-B visas — two thirds of all H1-B applicants are Indians who work in tech and other highly specialized fields. And there's the historic candidacy of Kamala Harris. In addition to being the first Black woman candidate for VP for one of the two major political parties...she's also the first person of Indian descent to be nominated.

[Clip: Kamala Harris: "Family is my sister. Family is my best friend, my nieces and my godchildren. Family is my uncles, my aunts and my chittis."](#)

Sabeena: When Senator Harris became the Democratic VP pick, mainstream politics reporting began to make visible the South Asian population. And with that, generalizations began heaping up.

The term "Desi" is often used to describe those of Indian, Bangladeshi, and Pakistani backgrounds. And it's a contested word. The countries that span South Asia and qualify as "Desi" contain a variety of cultures, subcultures, languages, religions, traditions, and political perspectives.

The term "South Asian" is often more controversial. Scholars have argued over which countries in the geographical area of "South Asia" even qualify as "South Asian" countries. For example, are people from Nepal or Afghanistan Desi? The word Desi, however, seems to be a popular word choice in representing a pan-South Asian experience and shared culture.

Zahir: So Sabeena, you have first hand experience growing up in the South Asian community in New Jersey. Can you tell us what that was like?

Sabeena: So I think growing up in New Jersey is a really unique experience as a Indian American. Um, it was nice having a lot of other Indian Americans around me, I would say still a predominantly white place, but having that kind of subculture to tap into was awesome. It's also interesting, 'cause I grew up with a lot of Gujaratis, or people whose parents are from the state of Gujarat in India...and as a Sindhi, it's interesting for me to learn more about Gujarati culture. It always felt great to like, kind of exchange culture within the Indian American community 'cause we were having such different experiences...I realized at some point in New Jersey that my experience of being South Asian and being South

Asian-American was very specific. And as I started to learn about the communities that surrounded me, like the Black community in Irvington, as well as the Bangladeshi community in Paterson, also South Asians, I realized that, you know, there was a lot of anti-Blackness and Islamophobia in my town. As I learned more about New Jersey's racial makeup or the census' reflection of that, I learned that there were other South Asian communities.

Zahir: And also you mentioned that you're Sindhi, and so for listeners who don't know, that's a community, correct me if I'm wrong, that's been displaced a lot throughout South Asia, displaced from Pakistan, displaced in India. I used to live in India. A lot of Sindhis have trouble getting housing.

Sabeena: Right, exactly, Zahir. These are the types of insights that have been left out of the mainstream discussion. You know, until now. With more South Asian voters than ever and excitement around Kamala Harris, South Asian political leaders are discovering their similarities *and* their differences.

Neha Dewan: “Good evening, everybody. My name is Neha Dewan and I'm the national director for South Asians for Biden.”

Sabeena: On August 29th, I stopped by a virtual event, titled “South Asian Women in Leadership: Ushering a New Wave of Diversity in the Biden-Harris Era.” While there was only one New Jerseyian present, the meeting was meant to highlight female South Asian leadership in light of Kamala Harris. And it ended up underscoring differences and nuances *within* the South Asian community. Differences in religion, class, documentation status, and education level exist in a community that may seem monolithic from the outside.

Nina Ahmad is a Bangladeshi woman running as Auditor General — not in New Jersey, but in Pennsylvania, [another state with a fast-growing Asian population](#). If elected, she would be the first woman of color to serve in that role.

Nina Ahmad: You see the CEOs and you think that that's where most South Asians are. But I have family who have been here on limited visas and have only recently been able to get citizenship and are really, you know, struggling.

Sabeena: You know, I couldn't tell how many participants were there, although questions kept popping up in the Q+A box, so I at least knew there was someone else on the other side of the screen other than the panelists.

It's just so odd to me, that these days, all “mobilization,” “organizing,” “community-building,” things that are critical to a “democracy,” are now dependent on if you have the premium version of a video conferencing service. I watched these South Asian women gather and blur across my screen, share space in a way they never have before and probably never would have.

Neha: “Today's event, featuring four amazing South Asian women leaders who are trailblazers in their community, is truly of incredible importance in light of

the historic selection of the first Black and South Asian woman of Indian heritage, Senator Kamala Harris as our Democratic vice presidential nominee.”

Sabeena: It's clear that Harris's nomination has been pretty significant for the South Asians that didn't feel engaged in politics before.

Harbir Bhatia: But only now, I would say 2020 is the first time we actually have a significant South Asian population to vote. Guess what? Most of them thus far have been very passive about it. Now, why do we think that is?

Sabeena: That's another speaker, Harbir Bhatia. She's a Sikh organizer and activist in the Bay area. She's been a community organizer for 25 years and she's now running for Santa Clara City Council.

Harbir: I come from a Sikh background, I'm a technologist, I'm a woman, I'm an Indian, I'm a South Asian...[Laughs.] I'm an American...so I would inspire, and I would hope that others are inspired to remember you can connect with society in a larger way, but we must actively participate to shape that future.

Sabeena: South Asians are really still finding their footing in American politics. And New Jersey is a good place to get a picture of what South Asian political involvement may look like in the future. It's also a reality check about the obstacles to organizing within the South Asian community. With their fast-growing population and vast diversity, South Asian voters may be a key factor in races in New Jersey and other parts of the country.

But still — so much remains uncertain. U.S. immigration policy, the response to COVID-19, taxes, policing in communities of color, all of these and many other factors will help influence if and how South Asians become involved in politics and how they see their role in the U.S. political system.

So, will South Asian voters help clinch elections in our future? Or will divisions along religious, class, and ethnic lines keep them apart? This has been a year that no one could have predicted. We've had a global pandemic, we've had, you know, uprisings for racial justice, a tense campaign season — it's going to be so interesting to see how things turn out.

Zahir: Sabeena, this has been wonderful. And I appreciate you being here, your expertise and also your honesty for tackling these issues within the South Asian community. So thanks for being on our show.

Sabeena: Thanks for having me, Zahir. It's always good to talk to someone else of the South Asian diaspora, who also understands the complexity of the group we belong to.

Zahir: That's all for this episode.

It was produced by Sabeena Singhani. It was edited by Mia Warren. She's our executive producer. Our audio engineer and senior producer is Jocelyn Gonzales. Our assistant producer is Anna Dilena. Our intern is Kenny Leon. Our development coordinator is Alejandro Salazar Dyer. Our executive editor is John Rudolph.

Our theme song was composed by Fareed Sajan.

I'm Zahir Janmohamed. Thanks for listening.

John Rudolph: Call Your Elders and A Better Life? are produced by Feet in 2 Worlds. For fifteen years, Feet in 2 Worlds has been telling the stories of today's immigrants and advancing the careers of immigrant journalists.

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