

Sholay to Sima aunty, US poll campaign gets desi touch

Both Trump and Biden campaigns reference desi culture to clinch crucial Indian-American vote

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- **Mausi:** Trump mein kya kharabi hai beta?
- **Jai:** Arre Mausi, Trump mein ek bhi achha gun ho to batau. Jab Senate jaata hai to galat kaam karke aata hai, moo kholta hai to jhoot bolta hai aur poore desh ko Covid ki bimari mein doboke rakha hai.
- **Mausi:** Theek hai beta mein Biden ko vote de kar aati hoon

Welcome to the US election desi style where the power of pop culture — tweaked Sholay dialogues, Bigg Boss memes and Sima Aunty of Indian Matchmaking fame — is being harnessed to urge Indian-Americans to get out and vote. Radio spots that have a doting daughter speaking to “Papaaji” in an unmistakable Punjabi accent and TV advertisements that promise to leave a safe world for “betiyan” (daughters) are all part of an intense campaign where both Democrat and Republicans are going all out to woo desis.

Even though Indian-Americans comprise less than 1% of all registered voters — 1.9 million — their influence goes beyond numbers. Milan Vaishnav, director at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, says the scale and scope of the outreach to South Asian voters is unprecedented. “This is taking place for two reasons. There is a top-down push from campaigns as they’ve internalised the growth, social mobility and deep pockets of the Indian-American community. But this is being met by a bottom-up surge of interest group formation, Indian-American mobilisers, and general awareness,” he says.

Varun Nikore, president of the Asian American and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) Victory Fund, agrees. “I have been in politics for 30 years and never seen the South Asian community so galvanised. I think part of it stems from the guilt and regret of not participating in the 2016 election



that led to Trump’s rise,” he says.

But things seem to have changed, acknowledges New York-based Republican Raj Bhayani. “Indian-Americans are a laidback community with a sense of inertia but that has been broken now.”

To drive in the message that disengagement is not an option, Desis United, a voluntary group that supports Biden-Harris, has been buying advertisements spots on South Asian networks since September. Founder Sundeep Dhiman says, “We are meeting Indian-American voters with language and culturally specific content.”

Their TV commercials raise emotional issues like hate attacks that targeted Indians and Trump’s sexist remarks raising doubts over women’s safety. The faces are Indian, with a mix of Hindi and English voiceovers and slogans like ‘Ekta badhao aur Trump ko harao’ (Increase unity and defeat Trump.) On the other side, Indian-American Republican Danny Gaekwad has

launched an ad blitz with a slogan that reads: Trump hai to safe hai’.

Trump supporters have also used cartoons, WhatsApp messages and Facebook posts to highlight the special relationship between Trump and PM Modi. “The turning point for Indian-Americans was the Democrats’ opposition to withdrawal of Article 370 in Kashmir: They know that only Trump is a true friend of India,” says Republican Bhayani. Cartoons showing Biden-Harris embracing anti-CAA protestors (Citizenship Amendment Act), cosying up to Pakistan PM Imran Khan or doing the bhangra with the Indian-American Muslim lobby have been circulated by @USAHindus4Trump.

Biden-Harris supporters are, meanwhile, rallying some desi star power. A video created by Atypical star Nik Dodani had cameos by a dozen or so Indian-origin celebrities like Padma Lakshmi and comedian Aparna Nancherla stressing the im-

portance of the South Asian community coming out to vote.

They See Blue (a play on the word desi) founder Sunil Mehta, a pro Biden-Harris voluntary group, points out that the reaction to a desi voice or a face is totally different. “We realised while campaigning for the 2018 mid-terms that when a Punjabi in the US heard Sat Sri Akal (a form of greeting used by Punjabi Sikhs), there would be an immediate level of comfort. We would be invited for chai instead of a cold brush-

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— VARUN NIKORE
PRESIDENT AAPI VICTORY FUND

off. We tried to replicate that remotely in this election with volunteers speaking in a language that the voters were comfortable with,” Mehta says. The group of software engineers turned accidental activists have created a software that extracted desi voters’ names from the voters list for targeted campaigning. This has helped their 4,000-strong force of volunteers reach out to a million voters in swing states like Texas and Ohio. “We managed to register 200,000 voters,” he adds.

Other civil rights groups like Asian Americans Advancing Justice believe that racial discrimination has led to the community’s low voter turnout. They started helplines in languages like Urdu, Hindi, and Bengali to raise voter awareness. High numbers of mail-in ballots indicate that this push towards greater awareness might break several records on November 3. But as Sima Aunty says, “All my efforts are meaningless, if you do not register to vote.”

Mumbai chawl to LA stage: Indian street kids are dancing their way to a better life

Foreign reality shows like Britain and America’s Got Talent are seeing many

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