

Indian Americans voice Kashmir concerns in White House Chidan and Rajghatta

WASHINGTON, FEB 25, 2000:

If posterity captures a defining moment that signaled the political coming of age of Indian Americans in the United States, it could be at noon in the year 2000 on a balmy Thursday in Washington. That's when a group of 33 well-heeled immigrants trooped into the White House to voice their views on the Presidential trip to South Asia at the invitation of the Clinton administration. Participants in the meeting, who spoke on background at the request of the White House to keep the discussions private, said the deliberations covered four broad areas: Kashmir, Pakistan's role in fomenting terrorism in the state, the folly of the President considering a Pakistan stopover, and up gradation of ties with India through trade and technology transfer. Possibly for the first time, the Indians went on the offensive on Kashmir, describing how a harmonious and pluralistic state had had its peace shredded by Pakistan-sponsored terrorism carried out by rabid and insular jihadists. Articulating this viewpoint was Kashmiri activist Jeevan Zutshi, while community activist Sunil Aghi said a stopover in Pakistan by the President at this juncture during an India trip would "hurt the sentiments of a billion people." Others like Narpat Bhandari pressed for a greater US recognition of India's geo-political aspirations, while his Silicon Valley colleague Kanwal Rekhi questioned the American soft spot for a nuclear and communist China at the expense of a more responsible and democratic India.

Administration officials Karl Inderfurth from the State Department and Bruce Riedel of the National Security Council heard the community leaders for nearly 100 minutes, but offered no clues about the President's agenda or itinerary. The Indian community was represented by a range of activists from all over the United States representing different professions and platforms, with a sprinkling of the usual factotums who claim close ties with the BJP leadership in New Delhi (the number of invitees had swelled from 20 to 33 by the time of the meeting). Among those who attended the meeting included Achamma Chandrasekhar, Ramesh Kapur, Babubhai Patel, Rajen Anand, Subhas Razdan, Sudhir Parekh and Gopal Vashisht. Both the participants and administration officials agreed that the inputs were useful and provided due recognition to the increasing influence and visibility of the Indian-American community. This growing clout has attracted wide coverage in recent times in US news papers on the East Coast and West Coast -- and some bilious reporting in the Pakistani media. One embittered Pakistani newspaper attributed to the White House meeting the sole agenda of thwarting the President's Pakistan stopover. It also claimed the pro-India lobby had planted a story in a Washington paper about the threat to President Clinton's life if he visited Pakistan. But the US media -- the San Francisco Chronicle, the San Jose Mercury News, The Washington Post and Washington Times among them -- have been lavish in their admiration for a skilled community that is only now acquiring political savvy. Reporting that Indian-Americans who now hold 40 per cent of high-tech jobs in Silicon Valley and earned \$60 billion last year, The Washington Times said on Friday that the community is pouring money into political campaigns and helping change the shape of US relations with India. The paper offered no examples of any huge contributions, but community activists acknowledge that Indian Americans are beginning to contribute in a small way, having taken a while to learn how the system works. But more than the money, some of them have an entry to influential politicians because of their line of work -- like say in the

medical or academic professions. For instance, prominent community activist Swadesh Chatterjee, who attended today's meeting, is commonly credited with softening the view on India of Jesse Helms, the powerful chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Another prominent activist is close to now exiled former speaker Newt Gingrich, having befriended him during their teaching career. Such connections are now beginning to pay off, and the White House interaction is a tacit acknowledgement of the political evolution of the community. The community was previously hopelessly divided with the usual factions based on political, ethnic, geographic and linguistic affiliations. But more recently they are attempting to bury their differences. At one recent community event, all office-bearers wore a simple badge that declared them to be Indian volunteers. Of an estimated 1.4 million Indians now in the United States, some 400,000 are said to be working in high-tech sectors, including an estimated 250,000 in the Bay area alone. The tech corridor in the Washington-Virginia has also attracted more than 70,000 Indians. More recently, skilled Indian professionals are coming into India at a rate of more than 50,000 a year.

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