

ASIAN AMERICANS
Dr. M. Lal Goel
University of West Florida
lgoel@uwf.edu
www.uwf.edu/lgoel

The history of mankind is a saga of migrations. At the dawn of civilization, humans numbered only a few million. Today at the beginning of the 21ST century the population is over 6 billion. As a result of migrations, Homo sapiens now occupy almost the entire terrestrial globe, except for the polar reaches.

Humans migrate for a variety of reasons: e.g., to escape environmental deterioration, political and religious persecution, economic hardship, and to fulfill their sense of adventure. A few examples will suffice to provide elaboration for these causes of migration.

Environmental deterioration has been a major factor in the movement of people. The area now covered by the sands of the Sahara was once lush, green, productive, and occupied by a substantial population. Desecration occurred, water courses shriveled, trees died, the topsoil blew away, and the people left.

The earliest settlers in America -- Native Americans-- migrated from the Orient because of severe climatic changes. When glaciers advanced, the sea level fell, and the shallow waters of the Bering Strait became a land corridor which allowed people to walk to North America. Columbus 'rediscovered' America in 1492. Just as environmental austerity or opportunity may facilitate migration so will man's inhumanity to man.

The Pilgrims who landed in Plymouth, MA, in 1620 came to America to avoid religious persecution in England and to worship according to their beliefs. In our time, political persecution is a major spur to migration. Many of the 20th Century migrations have been

caused by tyrannical regimes. The extreme right and the extreme left are equally intolerant to human rights.

The Nazis killed millions of Jews, Gypsies, Poles, and others who did not belong to the "master race." Those who were lucky escaped to England, France and to North and South America. In 1956, America received Hungarian political refugees, and in the 1970s and 1980s, thousands fled the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia and communist regimes in Vietnam and Cuba.

People also move for economic reasons. They abandon their homes to avoid starvation or simply to improve their economic status. Millions of Irish men and women came to America in the middle of the 19th Century to avoid starvation caused by the Potato Famine. The British Government refused to ship food to assist the starving Irish because it did not wish to interfere with the economic laws of supply and demand. Even in the best of times, people may move because of overcrowding or in response to a spirit of adventure.

In brief, people move to escape the negative effects of climatic and environmental changes, to run away from religious and political persecution, and to improve their economic conditions. Few people move for capricious reasons.

HISTORY OF MIGRATIONS TO AMERICA

The history of America is a history of waves of migrations. People have come here from all known civilizations. The blood that flows in American veins has received sustenance from every bloodline. In the 17th century, the English Puritans settled in the New England States as the Spanish settled in Florida. Early in the 19th century came a great flood of Irish and Germans -- 2 million Irish and 1.5 million Germans came to America between 1815 and 1860. The next wave brought some 10 million to America's shores between 1880 and 1890. These

were mostly Western European -- English, Dutch, Swedes, and Norwegians. The third wave was even bigger: 16 million from 1890 to 1914. Most of the newcomers (80%) were Eastern and Southern Europeans -- Sicilians, Greeks, Poles, Czechs, Italians and Russian Jews. A small number of Asians also entered the United States in the 19th Century. Nearly 200,000 Chinese laborers came to the West to build the railroads, but in 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act eliminated this flow.

Then in 1924, immigration was severely curtailed and almost eliminated for certain countries. The 1924 National Origins Act established quotas for each country outside the Western Hemisphere. The 1924 Act was directed against Eastern Europeans, and it was particularly prejudiced against Asians.

The 1924 Immigration Act is a remarkable document because it sought to freeze the ethnic composition of America. Those allowed to enter were primarily the British, Germans, Irish and the Scandinavians. Those from Southern and Eastern Europe were limited to smaller quotas. Asians were banned altogether. The British historian, Arnold Toynbee, remarked that the 1924 Act cut off America from the world's poor, tired and huddled masses.

Pressure built up after the War to change the unfair immigration policy. The pressure came from the Eastern and Southern Europeans. Jews, Italians, Greeks and Poles fought to bring their families and their co-religionists to the U.S. Sweeping changes in immigration policy were enacted in 1965 under President Lyndon Johnson. The new law eliminated ethnicity and race as factors in immigration. Every nation regardless of size, race, religion, and political ideology was allowed 20,000 immigrants with a total for all countries not to exceed 170,000 per year. For the first time, Italy and Poland as well as India and China were

placed on the same footing as Germany and England.

The number of Asians migrating to the U.S. was not expected to be large. In the hearings before the U.S. Congress in 1964, the then Attorney General Robert Kennedy, estimated the number of Asian immigrants expected to enter the U.S. to be about 5,000. Although the 1965 bill sought to benefit future Eastern and Southern Europeans, the Asians actually benefited the most. Without the sweeping changes enacted by the U.S. Congress in 1965, most Asians in the United States would not be here.

ASIAN AMERICANS

The number of Asian and Pacific immigrants has increased rapidly since 1965. First to benefit were people from Philippines, Taiwan, and Korea. Political repression in Indo-China added Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Laotians. Many students from India took advantage of the changed law and settled down in the U.S. instead of returning home. In 1984, six of the seven top countries, after Mexico, to send immigrants to America were Asian countries.

As the century closes, Asians have become the nation's fastest growing ethnic minority. High birth rates and legal immigration have contributed to this growth. In 1986 alone, some 300,000 Asians entered the U.S. legally. This figure does not include those who entered illegally. The 1990 Asian-American population in the U.S. was 7 million - or nearly 2.5 percent of the total u.s. population. In 2000, this increased to 11 million or approximately 4.1 percent of the U.S. population. See Appendix for the population data.

The major Asian nationality groups in America are ranked as follows (2000): Chinese (2.4m), Filipino (1.8m), Indians (1.7m), Koreans (1.1m), Vietnamese (1.1m), Japanese (797k)

and a smaller number of Cambodians, Laotians, Malaysians, Thais, Pakistanis and Bangladeshi's. Interestingly, the Japanese play no major role in the current wave of Asian migration. Most Asians settle in California, followed by New York, Texas, New Jersey, Illinois, and Florida. Military bases in Northwest Florida have contributed to the settlement of Asians in the Pensacola area, including Ft. Walton Beach and Panama City.

Although the total Asian population in America is small (only 4.1 percent in 2000), Asian immigrants are compiling an amazing record of achievement. The enrollment of Asian students at the nation's elite colleges far exceeds their population share. On the average, Asian students constitute 14 percent of the freshmen class at Harvard, 20 percent at MIT, 21 percent at the California Institute of Technology, and 25 percent at the University of California at Berkeley. In 1987, nine out of 40 of the Westinghouse's Science Talent Search came from Asian families.

Partly as a result of their academic accomplishments, Asians are climbing the economic ladder with remarkable speed. Their average family income now exceeds both white and black incomes in America. Only the Vietnamese have depressed incomes.

Asians are well represented in the professions, management, and in business. A survey in Chicago indicated that 39 percent of Asians in that city were either managers or professionals which is twice the number of whites in these positions.

What accounts for the remarkable success of Asians in America? No single factor will suffice as an explanation, although the Asian family structure and a well developed work ethic are part of the explanation. Asian families are close: parents make many sacrifices for their children, and brothers help brothers. Chinese grocery stores, Indian motels, and Vietnamese

fishing boats are usually acquired by pooling together extended family resources.

The Asian has a strong work ethic. Many Asian entrepreneurs who own fish markets, convenience stores, and green groceries make the 40-hour work week look like a vacation.

Unlike the earlier European mass migrations, which originated from the working class poor, the post-1965 Asian immigrants tend to be highly educated. The Asian movement is largely middle class. Except for the Indochinese refugees, new Asian immigrants have, on average, twice the educational skills of native Americans.

The best explanation for the Asian success story is perhaps the psychological factor. Like previous immigrants, the Asian immigrant brings with him drive and motivation to succeed at all costs. A personal example will illustrate the point.

Through appeals to relatives and friends in India, I managed to collect the \$500 necessary for the sea voyage from India to the U.S. I arrived at New York Harbor as a youth of 20 with insufficient fare to reach my destination to the University of Oregon. In New York, I had to borrow \$15 to pay the bus fare to my destination out West. I worked my way through college, sometimes working 12 hour shifts at \$1 per hour (1960s) in the peach orchards of California in the 110° weather.

Education was a dream in spite of the fact that my father had seventh-grade education, and my mother was completely unlettered. Success came in response to persistence and hard work while failure always lurked in the background. I graduated first among a dozen doctoral students enrolled in the program at the State University of New York, Buffalo. At the University of West Florida I achieved promotion to the rank of Full Professor rapidly. I have published four books and have received the University's Distinguished Awards both in

Research and Teaching. These accomplishments have come in spite of difficulties with English, notwithstanding a brown skin in a white world, and in spite of a different cultural background. I am an American resident now and I love America, but I still derive my greater strength from my Indian heritage. Most members of the larger Asian community can share similar stories of hard work leading to success.

Many Asians complain that they are victims of racial discrimination. They have to work harder than native-born Americans to compete for the same jobs or to get promotions. Ivy-league colleges use negative quotas to keep the number of Asian students down. In some xenophobic communities, buying or renting a home may cause problems. Although racially motivated physical violence is rare against Asians, it does occur.

Native Americans have always been ambivalent about and somewhat hostile to new immigrants. What is meted out to Asians is a part of the long American tradition of suspicion about new immigrants. In 1751, Benjamin Franklin asked, "Why should Pennsylvania, founded by the English, become a colony of aliens, who will shortly be so numerous as to Germanize us, instead of our Anglifying them?" (Time, July 8, 1985). In 1930, Boston Mayor Ted Lyman called the Irish, "a race that will never be infused into our own, but on the contrary will always remain distant and hostile" (Time, July 8, 1985). The hostility faced by members of the Asian community is no worse than hostility faced by Italians three generations ago.

America is a country that endlessly reinvents itself. The secret to American genius is that it adds new bloodlines every generation, thus renewing and refurbishing the entire genetic pool. The energy of new combinations produces something different and better. The faces of immigrants are different now, mostly brown and yellow. They do not arrive at Ellis Island as

previous generations did; they come through the Kennedy Airport. The end result is the same - a more vigorous and vibrant America.

(Asian population data are included in an Appendix)

APPENDIX

ASIAN POPULATION IN THE U.S. (ROUNDED)

	<u>1990 Census</u>	<u>2000 Census</u>
Total Asian	7.0 m	11.0 m
Chinese	1.6m	2.4m
Filipino	1.4m	1.8m
Indian	815 K	1.7m
Korean	799K	1.1m
Vietnamese	614K	1.1m
Japanese	848K	797K
All Other	924K	2.1m

Asian Indians by State in 2000	Alabama	6,900
	Alaska	723
	Arizona	14,741

Arkansas	3,104
California	314,819
Colorado	11,720
Connecticut	23,662
Delaware	5,280
District of Columbia	2,845
Florida	70,740
Georgia	46,132
Hawaii	1,441
Idaho	1,289
Illinois	124,723
Indiana	14,685
Iowa	5,641
Kansa	8,153
Kentucky	6,771
Louisiana	8,280
Maine	1,021
Maryland	49,909
Massachusetts	43,801
Michigan	54,631
Minnesota	16,887
Mississippi	3,827
Missouri	12,169
Montana	379
Nebraska	3,273
Nevada	5,535
New Hampshire	3,873
New Jersey	169,180
New Mexico	3,104
New York	251,724
North Carolina	26,197
North Dakota	822
Ohio	38,752
Oklahoma	8,502
Oregon	9,575
Pennsylvania	57,241
Rhode Island	2,942
South Carolina	8,356
South Dakota	611

Tennessee	12,835
Texas	129,365
Utah	3,065
Vermont	858
Virginia	48,815
Washington	23,992
West Virginia	2,856
Wisconsin	12,665
Wyoming	354
Total:	1,678,765

Asian Indians by State in 1990

California	160K
New York	141K
New Jersey	79K
Illinois	64K
Texas	55K
Florida	31K
Maryland	28K
Pennsylvania	28K
Michigan	24K
Ohio	21K
All other States	184K
Total of all states	815K

Additional information on Asian Americans and Asian Indians:

<http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/foreign/foreign98.html>

<http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/race/api.html>

www.indianembassy.org/indusrel/comm.htm (Indian American Community–A Story of Achievement); <http://www.indnet.org>

www.thingsindian.com/history.htm (History and demographics)

www.demographics.com (Demographics)

www.census.gov/prod/cen2000/dp1/2khus.pdf

http://factfinder.census.gov/bf/?lang=en_vt_name=DEC_2000_SF1_U_QTP3_geo_id=01000_US.html

ADDITIONAL ARTICLES BY THIS AUTHOR, VISIT: www.uwf.edu/lgoel