

ASIAN AMERICANS: A MODEL MINORITY

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The history of mankind is a saga of migrations. At the dawn of civilization, humans numbered only a few million. Today in the 21ST century the population exceeds 7 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 African 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 died or left.

The earliest settlers in America -- Native Americans-- migrated from the Orient because they could walk on solid ground. When glaciers advanced, the sea levels fell, and a land corridor appeared connecting Russia to Alaska. This allowed people to simply walk from the Orient to America. Columbus only 'rediscovered' America in 1492.

Just as an environmental austerity 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 Europe. Similarly, many of the 20th and 21st Century migrations are caused by political and/or religious persecution. 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 communist regimes in Vietnam and Cuba. In the 21st century, the civil war in Syria has added to the human flow across borders.

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. Even in the best of times, people may move because of overcrowding or in response to a spirit of adventure. 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. The newcomers were Eastern and Southern Europeans -- Sicilians, Greeks, Poles, Czechs, Italians and Russian Jews. A small number of Asians also entered in the 19th Century. Nearly 200,000 Chinese 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 Act froze the ethnic composition of America. Those allowed to enter were primarily the British, Germans, Irish, the Scandinavians and other Northern Europeans. Those from Southern and Eastern Europe were limited to smaller quotas. Asians were banned altogether. For information on different quotas, see: <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5078>

Pressure built up after World War Two to change the unfair immigration policy. The pressure came from the Eastern and Southern Europeans. They 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 Eastern and Southern Europeans, the Asians actually benefited the most.

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.

Asians are 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. This increased to 11 million in 2000 and to 14.7 million in 2010. The 2021 Asian population is 22 million or about 7 percent of the US population of 333 million. See Table at the end for close estimates.

The major Asian nationality groups in America are ranked as follows: Chinese, Indians, Filipino, Koreans, Vietnamese, Japanese 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 Vietnamese in the Pensacola area, including Ft. Walton Beach and Panama City. Population data by nationality are given at the end.

Although the total Asian population in America is small at 7 percent, 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 22 to 26 pct at Ivy League schools. Indian children excel at winning many spelling-bee contests. Asians have climbed the economic ladder with remarkable speed. Their average family income now exceeds both white and black incomes. Indian income on the average is the highest among all groups.

Asians are well represented in the professions, management, and in business. Persons from India dominate the computer software industry. 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 convenience stores, motels and gas stations 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 largely middle class.

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE

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 Rs. 2,500 (or \$500 at the 1956 exchange rate) necessary for the sea voyage from India to the U.S. I arrived at New York Harbor as a youth of 20 with insufficient bus fare to reach my destination to the University of Oregon. The Committee on Friendly Relations among Foreign Students came to my rescue and paid the difference. I worked my way through college, sometimes working 12 hour shifts at \$1 per hour (1959) 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, where I taught for 30 years, I achieved promotion to the rank of Full Professor rapidly, ahead of my peers by a decade. I have published five 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 job or to get promotion. 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.

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 comers. 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 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-AMERICAN POPULATION

| | <u>1990 Census</u> | <u>2000 Census</u> | <u>2010 Census</u> | <u>2020 Census</u> |
|----------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Chinese | 1.6m | 2.4m | 3.1m | 4.1m |
| Indian | 815K | 1.7m | 2.8m | 4.0m |
| Filipino | 1.4m | 1.8m | 2.5m | 2.9m |
| Vietnamese | 614K | 1.1m | 1.5m | 1.8m |
| Korean | 799K | 1.1m | 1.4m | 1.5m |
| Japanese | 848K | 797K | 763K | 771k |
| All Other | 924K | 2.1m | 2.6m | 7.0m |
| Total Asian | 7.0 m | 11.0 m | 14.7 m | 22 m+- |
| Percentage (rounded) | 2.8% | 4% | 5% | 7% |

The data reported above are close estimates.

For 2020 census data and observations, see New York Times at:

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/08/21/us/asians-census-us.html>