

# ARE WE MORE SUCCESSFUL THAN INDIANS BACK HOME?



**Dr. Vasudev N Makhija**

**I**n recent days, I have been hearing and reading arguments that Indians in the US are more successful than their countrymen back home.



I have mixed feelings about this theory. On the one hand, being of Indian origin I take great pride and pleasure in people doing well in the US. On the other, I question this premise; even find it troubling. I thought long and hard about why this was troubling. If it is true, I wonder what impact it

will have on the psyche and behavior of people – both Indians and others in the U.S.

I decided to go to the people with this question. It was not quite scientific research. As I had expected, I found people to be highly polarized in their responses. Some told me emphatically that this premise was not accurate and annoyed them. Others agreed completely and accepted this community's success as a fact. Most people I spoke to, however, agreed that success needed to be defined before this question could be answered satisfactorily.

Let me start with the definition of success. There are two in the dictionary. The first one refers to an attainment of wealth, position, honor, or the like; the second means a favorable or prosperous termination of attempts or endeavors; the accomplishment of one's goals.

Conventionally, success is measured by the first definition, especially in the west and increasingly in urban India. One may argue that Indians in the U.S. are indeed successful because even though they are only about 1 percent of the US population (3.9 million as of 2017) they have among them

disproportionate numbers of professionals such as physicians, corporate executives and successful entrepreneurs. Their median annual household income is over \$100,000, which is significantly higher than that of other immigrant groups or the US population's as a whole. (Pew research; and Utpal M. Dholakia, Ph.D., blog post in Psychology Today).

Indian publications in the U.S. are replete with headlines of success as defined in this manner. It is hard to find headlines in these publications of success of first-generation Indian-Americans that is not measured by wealth, honor or power.

Some argue that this whole premise is faulty and that there are many successful multimillionaires in India in spite of the many hurdles they face there. The difference might be that successful Indians comprise a higher percentage of the total U.S. population compared with the successful Indians as a percent of population in India. That might make successful Indians become more visible and the subject of headlines in the U.S.

Let us now look at the second definition of success, which does not relate to accumulation of wealth or power. I can think of many examples of Indians in India who fit the second definition. One person who comes to mind is Dr. Rajendra Singh, a water conservationist and environmentalist from Alwar, Rajasthan. He is often referred to as the "waterman of India." He gave up his Ayurveda practice and teaching career after he was challenged to solve the water shortage problem in a village in Rajasthan. Starting from a single village, which was dry and barren, in 1985, he helped build over 8,600 johads -- earthen check dams to store rain water -- and helped implement other measures to improve the water table and supply in villages. He has brought water back to more than 1,000 villages. He may not be rich. But is he suc-



cessful? Absolutely!

Those who accept the premise that Indians in the U.S. are more successful attribute that success to grit, hard work, education, and greater opportunities. But just like the Indians in the U.S., Indians in India do not lack in grit, education and hard work. After leaving India, they do not develop new chemistry or traits. Other reasons said to be responsible for success in the US are lack of bureaucratic hurdles, government regulations/interference and corruption at all levels. Some people say there is less competition because of the smaller total population in the US. Some argue that Indians back home may be less inclined to pursue certain tasks and careers because of the stigma attached to those. In the US, they pursue them because “it is a matter of survival.” Others argue that in India, people with physical problems declare themselves ‘disabled’ more readily than they would in the U.S. The Indian family readily supports an individual who is not working. It is also felt that there is greater appreciation of work and making the effort in the U.S., which provides greater impetus to work hard and succeed.

Jennifer McNulty wrote in the newsletter in NewsCenter of UC Santa Cruz on June 1, 2017, that Indian Americans are the wealthiest and most highly educated immigrants in the country. But there’s nothing special about Indians per se, according to Economics Professor Nirvikar Singh, coauthor of *The Other One Percent: Indians in America*. According to Professor Singh: “There is no ‘secret sauce.’ There are no peculiarly Indian cultural traits.” He adds: “The simplest policy prescription may be this: Make sure everyone has access to education... Your path to success as an immigrant depends a lot on what you bring in and what your constraints are in your new home.”

Of course, in the U.S. there are other hurdles like discrimination in corporate jobs and professions. Indian immigrants facing such hurdles have followed other paths like retail, or moved to hotels, restaurants and convenient stores. Many go on to become entrepreneurs. Singh said: “Someone who started out working in a gas station might end up owning twelve of them.” We have all heard of such success stories.

My biggest concern about this statistical fact of success is that it feeds into the model minority myth that Indians, like other minorities, embrace. Model minority myth is a significant barrier to seeking help by those who have mental illnesses. We would love to believe that our community does not have such (mental health) problems. However, nothing can be farther from the truth. This causes significant delays in treatment, often with drastic consequences like inability to function in the family, at work and socially; abuse of spouses and

children; sometimes even tragic consequences like suicide. As Dr. Dholakia stated in his blog post, financial success does not necessarily mean success in other life domains, like happiness and contentment.

Indian students believing in the model minority myth experience shame and embarrassment when they have to reach out for additional help in colleges and universities. Sometimes, even the educators wonder how someone from this community could have academic difficulties. This deprives the student of the opportunity to seek help and further induces shame and anxiety.

One second-generation Indian high school student told me that when Indians brag about their high achievements, they invite envy against themselves.

Contrast this with the success Dr. Rajendra Singh gained. It is defined differently.

We should not think of ourselves as uniquely gifted and above the others. We should be grateful for the circumstances and opportunities that have helped us achieve the success. Yes, we too have worked hard.

To summarize, while economic indicators may point to Indians’ success in the US, we need to broaden our perspective. The significance of this achievement diminishes when we take into account the broader definition of success and factor in the population difference between the two countries.

Let us also not forget many that Indians in the U.S. are struggling. 7.5% of Indians in the U.S. live in poverty (Pew research, 2015). Let us be grateful and have some humility. Let us practice generosity toward those who are less successful and less fortunate.

