

{ FROM NORTH CAROLINA }

A bottom-up view of India-US relationship

Prashant Jha

letters@hindustantimes.com

RALEIGH/CARY, NORTH CAROLINA: On a warm April morning, in the premises of the Hindu Society of North Carolina in Morrisville, a grand hall was buzzing with activity. Guests registered at a desk put up by the United States (US) Small Business Administration office. An idli breakfast was laid out before a one-day event on the India-US business connection kicked off.

As North Carolina governor Roy Cooper walked in, along with the Indian ambassador to the US Taranjit Singh Sandhu, a Gujarati-origin entrepreneur said, "We are in a town in America which has one-third Indians. Most small business owners here are Indians. The Indian ambassador is here. And the state governor makes it a point to inaugurate the event. This couldn't have happened 15 years ago."

While the India-US relationship is often viewed from the prism of Delhi and Washington DC, American states are significant players in bilateral ties. It is here that the strengths that India brings to bear, with its demographic strength, student population, corporate firepower, diaspora's influence, market lure and tech ecosystem, is felt acutely.

A stark illustration of this connect was visible when HT travelled last week to North Carolina, a state that one does not instinctively associate with the bilateral relationship, to track how Indian diplomacy operated in America. North Carolina is home to three top universities and a research triangle park (RTP), which has 170 companies that employ 42,000 workers. The state is home to Indian investors. And it is home to over 100,000 Indian-Americans.

From India Inc to small businesses.

HCL Tech first set up its global delivery centre in the town of Cary in 2008, and in the years since, has become an important part of the state's ecosystem, contributing to jobs, revenue, train-

ing and civic partnerships.

As Sandhu visited HCL, the company's top executives told him that when they had first started the facility, it had 87% Indian employees on H-1B visas and 13% local employees. Today, the ratio has reversed. "We have 87% local employees and 13% Indians here. We have created 2,400 jobs in Cary alone. Overall, HCL in the US has 23,000 employees, 73% of whom are local," said Jagadeshwar Gattu, president of the HCL digital foundation. At a time when the tech sector has seen thousands of layoffs, HCL brought in 4,000 employees last year.

Bharat Forge has invested \$127.3 million in an aluminium forging plant to manufacture automobile components in North Carolina. Infosys has a tech and innovation hub in the state creating 2,000 jobs. North Carolina even has set up an investment office in Bengaluru, exploring leads, wooing investors, and laying out the red carpet.

And these Indian companies are part of a wider pattern of Indian foreign direct investment (FDI) flows into America. Today, Indian FDI in the US amounts to \$14.4 billion and Indian companies have created 72,000 direct jobs. Indian capital is suddenly a hot commodity.

But it isn't just the big companies. The Morrisville event, organised by the Indian embassy in collaboration with the office of international trade of Small Business Administration, was meant to explore collaboration in the domain of small businesses, the heart of both economies.

Suggesting that India and America weren't two teams but one, Sandhu spoke about the centrality of micro, small and medium sector enterprises in India—it contributes to one-third of the GDP, accounts for 45% exports, employs 110 million people. "5Cs are key to strengthening the small business connect between India and the US," he said. These included capital, commerce, capacity-building, cutting edge technology and connect.

Assistant secretary of com-



India's ambassador to the US Taranjit Singh Sandhu interacts with Suman K Bery, vice-chairman of NITI Aayog.

ANI

merce Arun Venkataraman painted the big picture of the relationship, pointing out that India-US trade in goods and services now stands at \$192 billion. "The US has the largest start-up ecosystem in the world and India is the third largest ecosystem, crossing 100 unicorns in 2022...We are very optimistic about possibilities."

Intensifying the knowledge partnership

The economic linkages are closely intertwined with educational linkages. In North Carolina, Sandhu visited UNC-Chapel Hill, one of America's oldest public universities that also has a Modern Indian Studies programme, and Duke, one of the country's finest universities.

In interactions with university presidents and Indian students, Sandhu reminded them that there are over 200,000 Indian students in America, two-thirds of whom are in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. Given that many of these students have come through the Indian college system, where higher education is heavily subsidised, Sandhu said, with a smile, "I often tell my American friends that India has subsidised your development story too."

Leveraging the diaspora connect

In a virtuous cycle, the influence of the Indian-American diaspora enables and then is further reinforced by economic and educa-

tional linkages. And this was visible in the state.

Gurmale S Grewal's grandfather first came to the US over 100 years ago, making him a part of the early batch of Indian immigrants, many of them Sikhs, who came to the West Coast as students, farmers, revolutionaries, workers and then spread out.

Grewal and his brothers came to the country later in 1961 and eventually set up Singh Development, the oldest Indian-owned real estate and construction company in America, in 1973.

The diaspora is also engaged in local politics.

Steve Rao, the longest serving elected Asian-American official in the state, is a council member of Morrisville. Rao, who played a key role in organising the small business summit, noted: "I can start my day in Morrisville with an Idli Dosa breakfast and a South Indian filter coffee, watch cricket at Church Street Park and end my day with a Holi or Diwali festival at the Koka Booth Amphitheatre in Cary or Hindu Society of North Carolina."

Community leaders have also formed a North Carolina Indian-American Political Action Committee that funds candidates across the political divide. The idea is to enable the participation of the community in politics, drive home to the state's leaders the importance of Indian-Americans, enhance the community's access to the leadership and push for their interests. "Money talks in the American system. And we are

being taken seriously now," a member of the committee said.

They are just examples of a wide, heterogeneous community of students and doctors, engineers and tech professionals, scientists and politicians, business magnates and small entrepreneurs in North Carolina. Hindi and Telugu are among the ten most widely spoken languages in the state. There are, by some accounts, 55 Indian restaurants in just the RTP area alone.

Engaging with political leadership

All of this—the knowledge partnership, the economic linkages, the diaspora connect—is what ensures that when the Indian ambassador walks into a state, the political leadership takes it seriously.

Besides addressing the India-US business event, state governor Cooper had a one-on-one meeting with Sandhu. If North Carolina's Secretary of State and commerce secretary hosted Sandhu for lunch the same day, the state's House Speaker Tim Moore introduced and recognised the ambassador in front of the House members on the floor, with legislators giving the ambassador a standing ovation—a first for any Indian ambassador in the state.

Mayors and council members of Cary and Morrisville celebrated the relationship with India, with a Mumbai-born Morrisville Council member, Satish Garimella, handing over the keys of the town to Sandhu. "I came to this country to study, worked as a senior executive in top companies, became a citizen and entered politics. For me to hand over the keys of my American town to my Indian ambassador is deeply symbolic," he said.

Away from Delhi and DC, smart Indian diplomacy is quietly leveraging India's strengths to build and deepen a connect with American states. While the strategic convergence on China or divergences on democracy at the top capture the headlines, North Carolina offers a microcosm of the breadth and depth of the India-America partnership on the ground.