

Special Report

more obvious than in the realm of foreign policy, in the increasingly large and important task of determining how India should fit into the New World.

Most Americans would probably be surprised to learn that India is, by all accounts, the most pro-American country in the world. The Pew Global Attitudes Survey, released in June 2005, asked people in 16 countries whether they had a favorable impression of the United States. A stunning 71 percent of Indians said yes. Only Americans had a more favorable view of America (83 percent). The numbers are somewhat lower in other surveys, but the basic finding remains true: Indians are extremely comfortable with, and well disposed toward, America.

This may be because for decades India's government tried to force-feed anti-Americanism down people's throats. (Politicians in the 1970s spoke so often of the "hidden hand" when explaining India's miseries—by which they meant the CIA or American interference generally—that cartoonists took to drawing an actual hand that descended every now and then to cause havoc.) More likely it is because Indians understand America. It is a noisy, open society with a chaotic democratic system—like theirs. Many urban Indians speak America's language, are familiar with the country and often actually know someone who lives there, possibly even a relative.

The Indian-American community has been a bridge between the two cultures. The term often used to describe Indians leaving their country is "brain drain." But it's been more like brain gain, for both sides. Indians abroad have played a crucial role in open-



OPEN FOR BUSINESS: Private initiative is driving economic growth

Growing up in America, the Pulitzer-winning writer felt 'intense pressure to be ... loyal to the old world and fluent in the new.'

MY TWO

BY JHUMPA LAHIRI

I have lived in the United States for almost 37 years and anticipate growing old in this country. Therefore, with the exception of my first two years in London, "Indian-American" has been a constant way to describe me. Less constant is my relationship to the term. When I was growing up in Rhode Island in the 1970s I felt neither Indian nor American. Like many immigrant offspring I felt intense pressure to be two things, loyal to the old world and fluent in the new, approved of on either side of the hyphen. Looking back, I see that this was generally the

case. But my perception as a young girl was that I fell short at both ends, shuttling between two dimensions that had nothing to do with one another.

At home I followed the customs of my parents, speaking Bengali and eating rice and dal with my fingers. These ordinary facts seemed part of a secret, utterly alien way of life, and I took pains to hide them from my American friends. For my parents, home was not our house in Rhode Island but Calcutta, where they were raised. I was aware that the things they lived for—the Nazrul songs they listened to on the reel-to-reel, the family

they missed, the clothes my mother wore that were not available in any store in any mall—were at once as precious and as worthless as an outmoded currency.

I also entered a world my parents had little knowledge or control of: school, books, music, television, things that seeped in and became a fundamental aspect of who I am. I spoke English without an accent, comprehending the language in a way my parents still do not. And yet there was evidence that I was not entirely American. In addition to my distinguishing name and looks, I did not attend Sunday school, did not know how to

ice-skate, and disappeared to India for months at a time. Many of these friends proudly called themselves Irish-American or Italian-American. But they were several generations removed from the frequently humiliating process of immigration, so that the ethnic roots they claimed had descended underground whereas mine were still tangled and green. According to my parents I was not American, nor would I ever be no matter how hard I tried. I felt doomed by their pronouncement, misunderstood and gradually defiant. In spite of the first lessons of arithmetic, one plus one did not equal two

but zero, my conflicting selves always canceling each other out.

When I first started writing I was not conscious that my subject was the Indian-American experience. What drew me to it

ing up the mother country. They returned to India with money, investment ideas, global standards and, most important, a sense that one could achieve anything. An Indian parliamentarian once famously asked the then prime minister, Indira Gandhi, "Why is it that Indians seem to succeed everywhere except in their own country?" The stories of Indians scaling the highest peaks in America have produced pride and emulation in India. Americans, for their part, have embraced India in some measure because they have had a positive experience with Indians in America.

AMERICANS ALSO FIND INDIA UNDERSTANDABLE. They are puzzled and disturbed by impenetrable decision-making elites like the Chinese Politburo or the Iranian Council of Guardians. A quarrelsome democracy that keeps moving backward, forward and sideways—that they know. Take the current negotiations on nuclear issues. Americans watch what is going on in New Delhi, with people inside the government who are opposed to a nuclear deal leaking negative stories to the media, political opponents using the issue to score points, true ideological opponents being utterly implacable—and this all seems very familiar. Similar things happen every day in Washington.

Most countries have relationships that are almost exclusively between governments. Think of the links between the United States and Saudi Arabia, which exist among a few dozen high officials and have never really gone beyond that. But sometimes bonds develop

not merely between states but between societies. Twice before, the United States had developed a relationship with a country that was strategic but also much more—with Britain and later with Israel. In both cases, the resulting ties were broad and deep, going well beyond government officials and diplomatic negotiations. The two countries knew each other, understood each other and as a result became natural and almost permanent partners. America has the opportunity to forge such a relationship with India.

This is not a matter of strategic "balancing" against China. The world is not that simple. The United States should not create a self-fulfilling prophecy of a conflict with China. The American relationship with China is complex, with many elements of cooperation. China, after all, is one of America's chief creditors, and Americans in turn buy Chinese goods, fueling its growth. Nor will India want to play along as a counterweight to China, since its own relations with its powerful neighbor are crucial. Beijing will overtake America as India's largest trading partner within a couple of years. Both India and America will want to retain their independence in dealing with the Middle Kingdom. That said, the rise of China is the fundamental strategic shift that is altering Asia's—and the world's—landscape. And the United States and India will be glad to have each other's company in that circumstance.

This doesn't mean that the United States and India will agree on every policy issue. Remember that even during their close wartime alliance, Roosevelt and Churchill disagreed about several issues, most notably India's independence. America broke with

HYPHENATED: Lahiri manages dual loyalties

surprised that I do not have to explain further. What a difference from my early life, when there was no such way to describe me, when the most I could do was to clumsily and ineffectually explain.

As I approach middle age, one plus one equals two, both in my work and in my daily existence. The traditions on either side of the hyphen dwell in me like siblings, still occasionally sparring, one outshining the other depending on the day. But like siblings they are intimately familiar with one another, forgiving and intertwined. When my husband and I were married five years ago in Calcutta we invited friends who had never been to India, and they came full of enthusiasm for a place I avoided talking about in my childhood, fearful of what people might say. Around non-Indian friends, I no longer feel compelled to hide the

fact that I speak another language. I speak Bengali to my children, even though I lack the proficiency to teach them to read or write the language. As a child I sought perfection and so denied myself the claim to any identity. As an adult I accept that a bicultural upbringing is a rich but imperfect thing.

While I am American by virtue of the fact that I was raised in this country, I am Indian thanks to the efforts of two individuals. I feel Indian not because of the time I've spent in India or because of my genetic composition but rather because of my parents' steadfast presence in my life. They live three hours from my home; I speak to them daily and see them about once a month. Everything will change once they die. They will take certain things with them—conversations in another tongue, and perceptions about the difficulties of being foreign. Without them, the back-

and-forth life my family leads, both literally and figuratively, will at last approach stillness. An anchor will drop, and a line of connection will be severed.

I have always believed that I lack the authority my parents bring to being Indian. But as long as they live they protect me from feeling like an impostor. Their passing will mark not only the loss of the people who created me but the loss of a singular way of life, a singular struggle. The immigrant's journey, no matter how ultimately rewarding, is founded on departure and deprivation, but it secures for the subsequent generation a sense of arrival and advantage. I can see a day coming when my American side, lacking the counterpoint India has until now maintained, begins to gain ascendancy and weight. It is in fiction that I will continue to interpret the term "Indian-American," calculating that shifting equation, whatever answers it may yield.



raft was the desire to force the two worlds I occupied to mingle on the stage as I was not brave enough, or mature enough, to allow in life. My first book was published in 1999, and around then, on

the cusp of a new century, the term "Indian-American" has become part of this country's vocabulary. I've heard it so often that these days, if asked about my background, I use the term myself, pleasantly

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