

Rishi Sunak's rise signifies the arrival of the Indian diaspora

New generations of emigrants have successfully plunged into local politics

Sreeram Chaulia

Sreeram Chaulia is professor and dean of the Jindal School of International Affairs in Sonapat, India. His most recent book is "Crunch Time: Narendra Modi's National Security Crises."

The success of Rishi Sunak, former British chancellor, at winning a place in the runoff to be the next leader of the U.K.'s ruling Conservative Party and the country's next prime minister has triggered intense excitement and interest in India and among its 32 million-strong diaspora around the world.

The prospect of a young politician who hails from a family of Punjabi emigrants to East Africa and Britain making it to the top office of India's former colonial master has tantalized observers.

While Sunak consistently led balloting among Conservative members of parliament, he faces tough competition in the upcoming runoff among party members from former cabinet colleague Liz Truss. But the historic possibility that he might be the next leader of the U.K. has struck a chord.

Sunak's meteoric rise should not be viewed in isolation or as an exception attributable only to his individual talent and ability. Rather, it should be placed in the context of growing self-confidence and self-expression among the Indian diaspora as a whole.

While earlier generations quietly pursued better economic opportunities, more recent cohorts have become actively involved in local politics in their countries of domicile. In the past few decades, numerous political success stories have emerged from among the Indian diaspora.

There are now seven heads of government and state from the Indian diaspora in countries ranging from Portugal, Singapore, Suriname and Guyana to Mauritius and the Seychelles. Others serve in senior executive, legislative, judicial or party roles, such as U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris and Jagmeet Singh, head of Canada's opposition New Democratic Party.

Some of these high-flyers proudly showcase their Indian heritage as a badge of honor, while others downplay it for political convenience. But a common thread binding all these achievers is that they carry something distinctly Indian in terms of their democratic and pluralistic ancestral inheritance.

The tendency of diaspora Indians to comfortably mix and coexist in multicultural backgrounds without sealing themselves off from mainstream communities, and their skill at avoiding cultural barriers in their host nations, can be traced back to their forebears' lived experiences in diverse, tolerant and democratic India.

Kamala Harris, for example, has credited her Indian mother from the state of Tamil Nadu as inspiration for her entry into public life in the U.S. "My mother had been raised in a household where political activism and civic leadership came naturally," said Harris.

Sunak has praised his in-laws, Indian information technology pioneers and philanthropists Sudha Murty and Narayana Murthy. "[Theirs] is a story I'm really proud of and as the prime minister, I want to ensure that we can create more stories like theirs here at home," he told British voters.

Other common factors fueling the political influence of diaspora Indians is their dogged pursuit of higher education qualifications and the climbing of professional ladders in their countries of domicile. Despite facing racism and prejudice, many persons of Indian origin have displayed pragmatism and determination to prove their worth.

It is not a statistical fluke that the Indian diaspora is one of the richest minority communities in most developed countries, boasting of higher education levels and per capita incomes on average than other immigrant groups and even the majority ethnic groups in some host countries.

In countries where merit is said to be critical for advancement, people of Indian origin eye golden opportunities and work hard to attain them. Since there is a direct correlation between education, wealth and political clout in democracies, the political rise of the diaspora Indian stands on strong structural foundations.

Another factor that is propelling the political ascendance of diaspora Indians is the formation of their own ethnic associations and lobbies. Akin to successful Jewish groups which have helped support Israel's interests worldwide, these associations of Indian-origin people are now advocating for New Delhi's interests in various countries and are having an impact on policymaking.

Consider the recent vote by the U.S. House of Representatives to waive potential sanctions against India over its purchase of advanced Russian weapons systems.

This proposal was shepherded by California Rep. Rohit Khanna, a member of the so-called "samosa caucus" of U.S. diaspora Indians who support one another and maintain ties with the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. By no coincidence, Modi is an ardent champion of the diaspora.

Because Indian-origin politicians often get elected to political office in Western countries by appealing to voting blocs that include diaspora Indians, their associations and lobbies act as significant steppingstones.

Sunak's contention that his candidacy for Britain's highest office is "not the end of the British Indian story" and that "there is lots more we can achieve" is a direct acknowledgment of a triangular connection between India, its diaspora in the U.K. and his own spectacular political surge.

Whether or not Sunak takes over the prime minister's residence at 10 Downing St. in London, the phenomenon of the Indian diaspora arriving in a big way in public affairs and politics is undeniable. India itself may not be taking over the world, but its civilizational progeny are definitely going places.