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American Dream Has Room for Lawyer's Indian Heritage

With an impeccably tied, color-coordinated turban and a good suit, Navneet Singh Chugh visibly signals that he is proudly and intimately connected with his Indian origins — he was born and raised in Nagpur, India — and also knows how to navigate American systems of money and power.

Immigrant Stories

Chugh came to the U.S. in 1981, received his bachelor's degree in business from West Coast University in 1983 and his master's degree in business from USC in 1985. After passing his

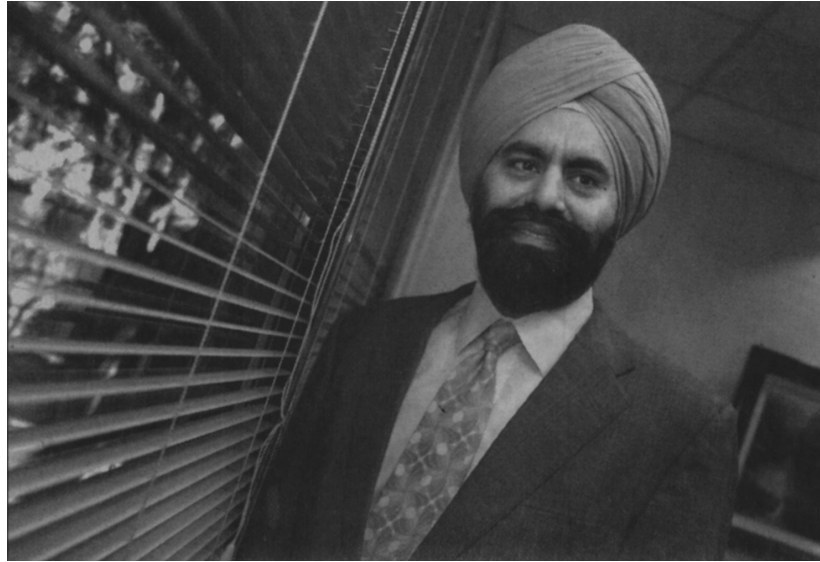
See Page 11 — AMERICAN

Editor's note: The United States is a nation of immigrants, foreign-born residents who have made important contributions to the country's development.

More than one in four California residents came here from foreign lands, and 13% of the state's lawyers — 19,000 attorneys — are immigrants.

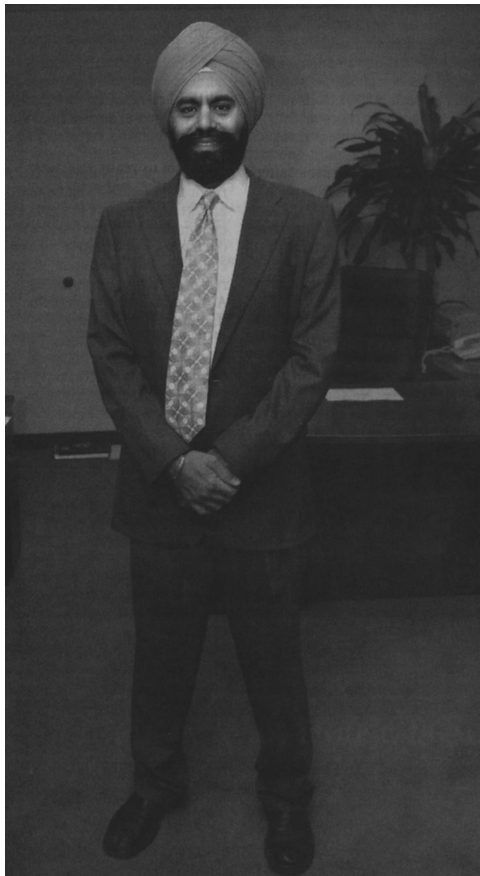
In this occasional series, we look at some of those attorneys and their pursuit of the American Dream.

Martin



ROBERT LEVINS / Daily Journal

"I've always believed in creating platforms that allow people to connect and network, rather than helping one person at a time," attorney Navneet Singh Chugh said.



"I advise people to look outward. It doesn't matter if you are in the U.S. or in India. See what you can do to be part of this bridge that we are unknowingly creating."

Navneet Singh Chugh
Lawyer

There is a saying that, if you show me a Jewish doctor, I'll show you his brother who is a lawyer. That's starting to be true of Indians. There are 5,000 Indian lawyers in the U.S. We are all small spokes in a wheel that unites India and the U.S.

When I was a kid growing up in India, I never thought about coming to the U.S. I was one of those people who didn't know if L.A. was in California or California was in L.A.

I lived in Nagpur, right in the center of India. We are Sikhs from Punjab [in the north], but my father had been transferred there for a government job, and he spent 40 years of his life there. We didn't have any family around us. But we had wonderful friends.

There was no television, no telephone in my city. It was only the human touch, so we were always with our friends, even if it was just sitting under a tree talking. Then I came to America, and there was not an Indian soul on my street.

We came for a couple of reasons. I had an aunt here in California who was working as a doctor. I had ranked first in my university graduating class in Nagpur, and she thought I could do further studies here. And my mother was sick; she had a rare urinary tract infection. My aunt said there was a cure here, and she should come for treatment at University of California, San Diego. And maybe it was because my aunt didn't have any family around here.

So I came with my mother. I was 19. I started studying at West Coast University to bridge the gap between the Indian and UC university systems. My mother got well, but the thought of going back was out. I was studying and having fun. I had to continue studying to keep my student visa alive. I knew I wanted an MBA so my choices were UCLA or USC. UCLA was going to charge me out-of-state tuition, so I decided I might as well go to USC.

So my father sold our house in Punjab and joined us here. The house was for his retirement. His life savings went into that house, and then the house went to pay for that wonderful USC tuition. It was a fair trade, I guess.

I immediately got active with the first gurdwara (Sikh temple) in Orange County. The same year I came, my uncle opened the second Indian restaurant in Orange County, Tandoor. Working at the restaurant really plugged me into the whole Indian community. There were 40,000 South Asians in Southern California in 1980. Now, the population is way up; there are 300,000 in Southern California. If you want to see India, go to Pioneer Boulevard in Artesia. There are 120 Indian shops on that street.

California is a lot less foreign now. But when I came, everything was different, even the light switch: On was off, and off was on. I had studied in English in India, but we never spoke it. But when you get here, you watch a little "Sesame Street" and "Dynasty" on TV, and pretty soon you are in Von's speaking English just fine.

When I got my MBA, I started an accounting practice. All of my first clients were Jewish doctors. I had been working in my aunt's doctors' offices. It was an easy job to get. I didn't even have to apply. And so all of her colleagues came to me.

Then one morning, I read a front-page article in the Wall Street Journal: Tax attorneys from Skadden said they were charging \$350 an hour. I had been referring a lot of work to attorneys, and they were making more money than I did. I wasn't happy about that.

Sikhs believe in working hard, doing good and sharing our wealth. But it's hard to share your wealth if you don't have any.

So I applied to law school the next year. I'm not sure if I was doing it

just for kicks or if I was serious. But I wrote an essay and got a full-tuition scholarship to Western States University. It was a wonderful surprise. Once I got the scholarship, I felt there was no option; I was going.

My wife, who is Indian, getting used with me for years about arguing U.S. citizenship.

She wanted me to, and I didn't. You don't have to be a citizen to take the California Bar. In fact, you don't even have to be a green-card holder. You can just fly in for the week, take the bar and go back home. I know at least 25 people in India who have done that. It looks good on their résumé. Only California and New York allow foreigners to take the bar, which is why there are so many foreign lawyers in those states.

After 23 years, I got my answer about whether I should become a citizen.

I was able to open a law office in Bangalore. The Indian government doesn't allow foreigners to own a law firm in India. I went to apply, and the officials were going to refuse me, but I happily brought out my Indian passport, and I was able to do it. We are the only American law firm in the world with offices, not just affiliates, in both India and the U.S.

I have been wanting to get out of Los Angeles for a long time. And I thought I would go to Santa Clara to open our new office in 2001. I jokingly offered it to my partner, and she went and opened the office, so I missed my chance to move. Then we opened an office in Bangalore. I was looking for houses and schools in Bangalore when a friend called and said he wanted to join the firm, and he went to open the Bangalore office. So there went my Bangalore plans.

I don't know what's next, maybe London. It's fun now. With a cell phone and BlackBerry and an Internet connection, you can set up anywhere, in a coffee shop or a tandoori restaurant.

Continued from page 1

CPA exams, he started an accounting practice in 1986.

Chugh's mild manner and measured speech belie his ambitious drive. He took five years to finish law school at Western States University in Fullerton, but he was simultaneously maintaining his full-time CPA practice. In 1992, Chugh used his law degree to shift his practice from accounting to law. He opened an office in New York in 2000, in Santa Clara in 2001 and in Bangalore, India, in 2004.

The Chugh firm is diverse, with Chinese, Ukrainian, Latino, Filipino, British and Indian employees. The entrance area is lined with stereotypical dark wood bookcases, but on the coffee table is a stack of India Journal newspapers, which Chugh publishes, and pamphlets about the various organizations he belongs to, including the Toastmasters, The Indus Entrepreneurs, the American Indian Foundation, the Foster India Foundation and the national and local chapters of the South Asian Bar Association.

It is obvious that Chugh has pursued the American dream aggressively, but not to the exclusion of traditional familial obligations. Chugh's 78-year-old father-in-law, in a starched turban and neatly combed beard, works for the firm as a legal consultant and enjoys the corner office. Chugh was interviewed by Daily Journal Staff Writer Anne Marie Ruff.

But there's hardly any difference now between being in India or in the U.S. They are working more and more on the same wavelength. There are some trade-offs — the food is better in India. But I ask my 11-year-old son if he would prefer to be in Bangalore or L.A., and he says it doesn't matter.

I have a cousin here who got a job in a big private firm out of business school. She is an American-born Indian, but I supported her to take a position in India. She went to the firm's office in Delhi and sends me e-mails every day about how happy she is.

America was the land of opportunity when we came here. But for our kid's generation, maybe the opportunities are getting more equal. Its 5,000 years late, but it's happening.

I advise people to look outward. It doesn't matter if you are in the U.S. or in India. See what you can do to be part of this bridge that we are unknowingly creating. I think we will look back in 200 years and see what an awesome bridge we've made, one investor, one businessman, one engineer, one attorney at a time.

I've always believed in creating platforms that allow people to connect and network, rather than helping one person at a time. I started the South Asian Bar Association of Southern California in 1995 and the National Association of South Asian Bar Associations in 2003. There was so much momentum that we could start a SABA in 10 minutes. I could call up four Indian attorney friends in Boston and arrange a meeting, and my secretary would send out letters to 50 Indian lawyers in Boston announcing the launch, and before they knew what was happening, they had a local branch.

Within 15 months, the entire South Asian law community in the U.S. was connected. Instead of an old boy's network, we had a South Asian network. Indians are copying Jews very nicely. They have a wonderful network. Doesn't every community do that?