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Another Brick in Donald Trump's Wall

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 By **Sandip Roy**

It's no surprise that a bunch of Indians rallied in front of the White House for US President Donald Trump's plan for 'merit-based' immigration. Just because Indians overwhelmingly vote Democrat, it does not mean they cannot recognise a Republican carrot when they see one. (That's referring to carrot-andstick rather than a carrot-top politician.)

Immigrant solidarity sounds good on paper, but when push comes to shove, each group watches out for its own interest.

The Republican Hindu Coalition might have spearheaded this rally, but the green card crisis is a real one. Ending a 'green card lottery', which they are not eligible for, is certainly something many non-resident Indians (NRIs) in the US would support.

Indians, stuck for decades in the serpentine green card queue, hope that 'merit-based' immigration will clear the backlog and push them forward. That's why they marched up Pennsylvania Avenue chanting, "Clear green card backlog!" and "Indians love Trump!"

The question is, despite his protestations, does Trump love them back? It's clear that the kind of immigrants he likes are the ones who come from Scandinavian countries rather than the so-called 'shithole' ones. Indians might pride themselves as hailing from the next superpower-in-waiting, but for Trump's energised support base, the only brown worth having is the one that comes from a spray-on tan.

The non-profit South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT) released a report, 'Communities on Fire: Confronting Hate Violence and Xenophobic Political Rhetoric' (goo.gl/M1UguH), which has shown a correlation between the rise of Trump and hate crimes targeting South Asians. They rose 45% compared to the year before. One in five of the perpetrators attacked in the name of Trump, or used his tagline, 'Make America great again'.

By trying to separate their wheat from what they think of as the undocumented chaff, Indians also wilfully ignore another inconvenient fact. A 2016 Pew Research Center report (goo.gl/6sAi4N) says Indians are the fastest-growing population of immigrants in the US illegally.

Those rallying on Pennsylvania Avenue think 'illegal' migrant means those who cross the US-Mexico border in the dead of night. In reality, it's also about half-a-

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million people who look like them who overstayed their visas. Mexico might still be the largest source of undocumented immigrants. But that number fell by 500,000 between 2009 and 2014. India's share grew.

The fact is the US immigration policy has always been built on racism and exclusion. The infamous Asian Exclusion Act was blatant about that racial preference. When that was reformed and national origin restrictions were removed, lawmakers opted for family reunification. The hope was since the US was largely western European anyway, it was those families that would mostly come to the US keeping the country white and Christian. But western Europe was booming, and it was Asians and Latin Americans who took advantage of the new policy. Then, the knowledge economy exploded and with it came the demand for scientists and engineers. Many of those were international students, and they brought their families with them.

Trump is proposing to overhaul immigration, pitting merit-based immigration against family-based immigration, classic divide and conquer. The irony, says John Skrentny, a sociologist at the University of California in San Diego, in an interview with The Atlantic ('The Last Time the US Seriously Considered Merit-Based Immigration', goo.gl/urxxtw), is that "the current defenders of the family-reunification system are exactly the people that the original proposers of it wanted to exclude". The anti-immigrant forces are not as much for merit-based immigration as they are against family-reunification. The real bogeyman is the same cultural anxiety about a changing US.

Merit-based immigration sounds fair and lovely. But what Indians have to realise is if Trump's proposal offers them asliver of green card hope, it also means dashing the hopes of thousands, including Indians, who might want to bring aged parents and siblings over to the US. That's a Faustian bargain for a community that prides itself on its family values.

There is now even a proposal for a green card processing fee that can go towards building Trump's wall. Aman Kapoor, founder of the advocacy body, Immigration Voice, thinks it's a "winwin" situation since it fulfils Trump's promise that the wall will not be paid for by US citizens, and it will help cut down on the green card waiting time for anxious Indians.

Win-win, except Indians, in the name of immigration reform, become just another brick in the wall that Trump wants to build to keep out what he calls murderers, drug smugglers, rapists and terrorists.

When immigration reform is predicated on the naked xenophobia of 'bad hombres', no immigrant will be safe. As Srinivas Kuchibhotla found out in that bar in Kansas.

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