

No Bush & Kerry, it's Big B for US

VIKRAM DOCTOR

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MUMBAI: For Americans voting on Tuesday, the options might seem dismal. With one candidate looking uninspiring and the other incompetent, it hardly seems worth taking the trouble to vote. All the more reason then, to listen to a candidate with a proven track record in setting pulses racing. [Amitabh For America](#) is the way to go — yes, that's our very own Bollywood ka Badshah who's running for election on the enticingly titled 'Green Card Party' ticket.

According to Sanjay Shah of Mahoot Media, one of the moving spirits behind this campaign, the appeal of Amitabh For America is simple. "We all want heroes, people we can look up to and who can inspire us," he says. And with neither of the two main candidates providing that, America might even look to Bollywood for relief. "People are disenchanted and that's our chance," says Mr Shah fervently. Vote Amitabh For America, instead.

Let's be honest, it's going to be a bit hard actually finding the Big B's name on any ballot paper. The man might even be a bit surprised to know he's [standing for election](#) at all. And there's no knowing what he would make of his gung-ho political manifesto. Some sample positions. Women's rights: "I have always felt right about The Women." The war on drugs: "The War on Drugs is good. We don't need the drugs; we have the Whisky." Crime: "As we saw in Sholay, The Crime is okay if you are a hero. If you are not a hero, please don't commit The Crime."

Amitabh For America is a caper dreamed up by Shah and his two buddies, Sandeep Sood and Nimesh Patel. The three of them run badmash.org, an irreverent comics website that takes off on the Indian-American community in the US and the stereotyped ways it's viewed by American culture. All three are second generation Indian-Americans, born and bred in California and part of a new wave of confident young desis looking to make it in the creative and political spheres.

Between them, they've done the dot-com thing, the stand-up comedy thing and Mr Shah is now doing the political thing — balancing Badmash with work for a Democratic representative in the California State senate. What brings them together is Mahoot Media, a company they set up to target the South Asian American community, primarily through means like animated comics.

Badmash is meant to prove the potential of this medium, though Mr Shah admits it was initially just fooling around. "We emailed the first strip to some 50 friends and from there it spread by word of mouth. We now have 300,000 people who get the strip, which makes us the largest mailing list of South Asians and people interested in South Asian humour like this," says Mr Shah.

The strip can also be read on their website, and tends to be topical, covering South Asian specific issues like outsourcing or immigration, as well as how the community reacts to broader American issues like gay marriage.

So it's not surprising that last summer, with the presidential campaign getting underway — and Kerry looking particularly weak at that time — the Badmash gang came up with idea of getting Amitabh to come to the rescue. They came up with the manifesto and a graphic image for the campaign, which they printed on stickers and started handing out. It was an immediate hit. "I knew it was working when I went to this Indian grocery store, and when I went to pay, I saw the cashier had put up one. He had never heard of Badmash, but he had found this," says Mr Shah.

Stickers were expensive to print, so they switched to flyers. "We'd go to South Asian events and put them under the windshields of the cars," says Mr Shah. They started selling T-shirts with the Amitabh for America image, which, Mr Shah says, have been selling quite well. They also created a short animated film — their second — after a spoof of 'The Simpsons' comic series entitled 'The Singhsons'.

"That was really successful, it got a lot of coverage and was linked to many other sites, so we thought we'd do it again," says Mr Shah.

Released around the time of the debates, the animation featured Amitabh landing between Bush and Kerry and stealing the show (with a little help from fellow film-star Arnold Schwarzenegger) and was an immediate hit. "So many people have been watching and forwarding it; we've had friends complaining because they're tired of finding it in their email boxes all the time," says Mr Shah. "We've also got over 7,000 new subscribers to Badmash. It's a perfect example of viral marketing."

Part of the reason for this success might be because the Indian-American community is at an interesting inflection point in terms of its visibility in American culture and politics. Numerically, it's become one of the fastest growing ethnic groups, with a 107% increase recorded in the '00 census and in parts of the country, it has displaced much longer established ethnic groups like the Japanese-Americans in California. In popular culture too, the real measure of mass visibility, Indian-Americans are making a small, but real impact. "When I was growing up, we were almost invisible, but now it's quite different," says Mr Shah.

And it's not just Bend It Like Beckham. There's Nearly Nirvana, the first Indian-American TV show currently in production in Hollywood — "not a place open to taking financial risks," notes Shah drily — and due for release on NBC. Indians now often feature on TV and film as doctors or computer specialists. "We're cornering the market in 'intelligent expert' roles," says Mr Shah. He also points to the way a few long-established characters like Apu, the shopkeeper in 'The Simpsons', have changed. "When Apu started, he was a pretty crude character, with a lot of emphasis on things like his accent. Now he's evolved, he's one of the most intelligent characters on the show. In a way, he exists to show up how ignorant most of the others are."

In politics too, the profile of Indians has changed, but not for their intelligence, as much as their money. "This is one of the more wealthy ethnic groups," says Mr Shah. "The rich doctors of 15 years ago have got richer. Others have invested in property and businesses and are now worth quite a lot. Both the Democrats and the Republicans have realised this." This campaign has seen both parties specifically courting the community for funds. "Our problem is no longer getting attention, but on how to convert the attention to action afterwards," adds Mr Shah.

But action for what? Mr Shah admits it's hard finding issues that really motivate the community as a whole. This was always seen as a reflexively Democratic community, perhaps because the earlier generation that came in the '60s, was influenced by the

idealism of that time. But Mr Shah admits that as it became wealthier, it started treading towards Republican. “This doesn’t make sense, since I think the Democrats are really better for small businesses — the Republicans are more in with the corporate crowd. But it’s been happening and I guess many Indian-Americans are now either conservative Democrats or moderate Republicans.” The Bobby Jindal campaign for Louisiana’s governor did rally some in the community. “Some of the few negative mails we got, came when we criticised Jindal,” says Mr Shah.

One possible issue that could motivate Indian-Americans is the Patriot Act. There’s plenty of anecdotal evidence of people being inconvenienced by it, or facing problems due to racial profiling. “Small things like that make a difference to people,” says Mr Shah. “It’s also one of the few issues where there really is a divide between Kerry, who says it needs to be modified, and Bush who supports it all the way.” He’s also hopeful of the impact of young second generation desis like the Badmash team, who are now old enough to vote and interested enough to make a difference.

These are the ABCD kids and the stereotype ones have always been pushed by their parents into safe professions, far away from such unremunerative things like political activism. But many of them were hedging their bets, says Mr Shah. “I know lots of kids who went into law to keep their parents happy with the promise of a legal career. But at the back of their minds, they knew they could use it to get into politics or activism of some kind — and now they’re doing that.” And what’s most interesting, he says, is that parents aren’t freaking out either. “They have changed too. They’re more relaxed about things and many of them really just want their kids to be happy.”

Which brings us back to Amitabh for America and why this year, he just might have an impact. Mr Shah says when it comes to voting, for whatever party, the community splits very divergently. “There are some who really value being an American citizen and they always vote. But there are many others who never vote. Perhaps they’re young and it doesn’t mean so much. Perhaps they came to America when they were too old to feel a real connection.” But in an election as close as this one promises to be, no vote can be ignored — especially when at least two of the crucial swing states, Ohio and Pennsylvania, have significant Indian-American communities.

“To be honest, our real aim with Amitabh for America is just to create some excitement, some tamasha that might get people motivated to go and vote,” says Mr Shah. It might be far from Bollywood, but it looks like the Big B may still have an important role to play.