

**REMARKS OF FCC COMMISSIONER AJIT PAI
BEFORE THE UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA LAW SCHOOL
SOUTH ASIAN LAW STUDENTS ASSOCIATION**

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I'd like to start off by thanking the South Asian Law Students Association (SALSA) for organizing today's event and inviting me to Penn Law School. It is a privilege to be with you today. If you had told me when I was a shy, insecure kid in rural Kansas that one day I would be addressing a group of law students of South Asian descent at one of our country's most respected law schools as a "Distinguished Speaker," I would have thought you were crazy. Indeed, had you told me back then that I was going to become a lawyer and a government official, I wouldn't have believed it.

You see, back in the 1970s and 1980s, there didn't seem to be many South Asians in this country working in the legal profession or in public service. When we were depicted in the media, which itself was an uncommon occurrence, we were generally doctors or engineers. And when I was growing up, I didn't personally know any South Asian attorneys. My father was a urologist; my mother was an anesthesiologist. And most of their Indian friends were also doctors.

So the idea of becoming an attorney didn't register with me. As I was going through school, there was an unspoken assumption that I would follow my parents' footsteps into medicine. But a funny thing happened on the way to medical school. In college, I found myself enjoying political science and economics courses more than my biology and chemistry classes. I really enjoyed participating in the parliamentary debate team, speaking and thinking (somewhat) logically. And perversely, I found that I actually enjoyed studying for and taking the LSAT. In case it's not apparent, I had no life in the mid-1990s.

So it was that I decided to go to law school instead of medical school. When I told my parents, I could tell that they were worried. The concept of their child becoming a lawyer was utterly foreign to them. After all, their vision of lawyers largely consisted of medical malpractice attorneys filing lawsuits, not the antitrust lawyer I would become in a few years.

To be sure, my parents were relieved when I informed them that I didn't want to become a lawyer who would sue doctors, a commitment that I have honored to this day. But they were nonetheless worried whether I would be able to earn a living in the legal profession. And, to be honest, they've never stopped fretting.

For example, when I was informed by the White House that the President intended to nominate me to serve on the Federal Communications Commission, I was honored and quite excited. But when I called home to share the good news with them, my mom's reaction was not what I expected. She wanted to know whether being an FCC Commissioner was a part-time job. Did it pay? Could I still remain a partner at my law firm? Fifteen years after graduating from law school, thirty years after asking why I got a 95 on a test instead of 100, she was still concerned about how I would support my family, still worrying about that chance that I might be coming back to live in my old bedroom in our Parsons, Kansas home.

Fortunately, things have changed considerably over the course of a generation. For one thing, let me tell you, it's great just to see so many desis in this room. Twenty years ago, you never would have seen this large a presence in a major law school.

But that's the case everywhere you look these days, including government service. Today, there's Governor Bobby Jindal of Louisiana and Governor Nikki Haley of South Carolina; Congressman Ami Bera of California; California Attorney General Kamala Harris; Judge Sri Srinivasan of the U.S.

Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit (a fellow Kansan, I would add); and my good friend Preet Bharara, U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of New York, just to name a few contemporary examples.

And if you want to go old school, there's former U.S. Congressman Dalip Singh Saund. Seriously—Google him, look him up on Wikipedia, find his interviews on YouTube. And then imagine what it must have been like to advocate for Indians to be allowed to become naturalized citizens, before Jackie Robinson broke baseball's color barrier. Imagine what it must have taken to get elected to Congress as a Punjabi immigrant less than three years after *Brown v. Board of Education*. That is courage.

Anyway, all of these distinguished public servants, from yesterday and today, are trailblazers within our community. I hope that their success paves the way for many more South Asian-Americans—maybe, you?—to enter our nation's public life.

Our progress, moreover, has not been limited to law and politics. On television, Mindy Kaling, Aziz Ansari, and Danny Pudi currently star on prime-time network sitcoms. (And these shows keep their characters alive! What I mean by that is that I knew, *knew* when I watched the 1983 James Bond movie *Octopussy* that the one prominent Indian actor in the film, Vijay Amritraj, was going to bite the dust. Not that I'm bitter.) In business, Indra Nooyi is CEO of PepsiCo, Satya Nadella is Microsoft's CEO, and Ajay Banga is CEO of Mastercard.

I could go on, but you get the point. For South Asian-American children growing up in the United States today, it should be clear that they can succeed in any field they wish to pursue. Their dreams shouldn't be limited by someone else's preferences or by ethnic stereotypes.

Speaking of stereotypes, I've faced my share of them as I've pursued my career in public service. Time after time, people have assumed that I must think a certain way or hold certain beliefs because of the color of my skin. It's hard to put into words just how frustrating this is.

I'm a big believer in the benefits of diversity. And one of its most important forms is intellectual diversity. When it comes to issues of the day, South Asian-Americans, just like other minority communities in our country, don't speak with one voice. There are South Asian-American liberals, conservatives, and moderates. There are South Asian-American Republicans, Democrats, and Independents.

This is how it should be. Like the subcontinent itself, South Asian-Americans are diverse in every way. Our particular upbringing and heritage influences the way many of us see the world. I'll never be able to dance bhangra properly; some of you might not savor idlis, sambar, and bisibelebath as much as I do.

But more seriously, who I am has been shaped quite a bit by my family. For example, my parents left India frustrated by corruption, great and petty, and the lack of opportunity. And they came to the United States with little more than ten dollars and a radio. They viewed this as a land of promise, a place where they could go as far as their hard work and talents would take them. In America, they believed anyone could be "movin' on up," as the theme song from "The Jeffersons" memorably put it back at that time.

Shortly after I was born, my parents moved to Canada to continue their medical training. After a few years, they had a choice to make: Should they practice there or in the United States? This was an easy decision. They wanted to work in the United States. This country gave them the chance to be more entrepreneurial, to build their own practice, and to treat patients with less government bureaucracy. For they didn't come to the West hoping that government would give them a better life; they came here so they could build a better life for themselves.

My parents' and my grandparents' perspective has influenced my own outlook in ways both large and small. They instilled in me an appreciation for the importance of individual initiative and a healthy

skepticism of government. They showed me that you can rise from humble origins to success. (Neither of their families had money; one grandfather ran a spare auto parts shop, and the other was a file clerk for an oil company in the Persian Gulf.) And they taught me that the United States is an exceptional nation and a force for good in the world at a time when some were blaming our country for many of the world's problems.

But look, this is just one point of view. Other South Asian-Americans have had different experiences that have impacted their children in different ways. That's why we mustn't fall into the trap of thinking that any single perspective is more authentically desi than any other. Instead, we should embrace the diversity within our community and insist that those outside of our community recognize it as well.

More broadly speaking, my view is that as a society, we should get away from the notion that if you have a certain skin color, ethnicity, or sexual orientation, you should think a certain way. And if you don't think that way, you are somehow betraying your roots or identity. I've been made painfully aware of this notion, especially in this job. But needless to say, I emphatically reject it. Each of us is unique. And each of us has the right, and I'd argue the obligation, to make up our own mind. As Tagore put it, "Most people believe the mind to be a mirror, more or less accurately reflecting the world outside them, not realizing on the contrary that the mind is itself the principal element of creation."

So as you start your career, my main advice to you is to forge your own path, on your own time. What does that mean, exactly? In no particular order, here are a few thoughts. Don't take a certain job because others expect you to do so or because it's the "prestigious" thing to do. You don't need to spend endless hours planning out in meticulous detail exactly how your career "should" proceed; as I've found in my own life, there's no way to predict when and in what direction opportunity will arise. Instead, do the best job you can at whatever it is you're doing; that alone will open doors for you later on. Remember the old Vedic principle of karma; you never know how a good deed or kind gesture today will pay off tomorrow. Do what will make you happy and what you believe to be right.

I'll be the first to tell you that I'm lucky to have had the career I've had thus far. But I'm not special. You, too, have families and friends that want the best for you. You, too, have received great educational opportunities. You, too, are fortunate to come of age in a country where, and in an era when, you can be what you want to be. And whether you know it or not, you, too, will have the goodwill and support of a huge South Asian community.

I was reminded of this last point when I visited India last month. While I was there, I had a chance to witness the first microloans being dispensed by an offshoot of the Grameen Bank to a group of poor, rural women who thus far had only known hard labor. I had a chance to meet the entrepreneurs at Little Eye Labs, a mobile app optimization startup that was just acquired by Facebook. I had a chance to hear from a woman who is the CEO of a major radio company and is encouraging Indian women in all fields to join the executive ranks. I had a chance to meet a team that is taking advantage of India's massive wireless penetration in order to allow poor people to make and accept mobile money transfers. And I had a chance to speak to hundreds of businesspeople, government officials, and others at India's biggest media and technology conference.

And despite all of the great things that people like these are doing—not merely saying or writing, like me, but *doing*—to make India and the world a better place, do you know what they told me, over and over again? *We* are proud of *you* for what you've accomplished. We're glad to see a young (I didn't disabuse them of that notion) Indian-American in a position of such prominence in the United States. It is such an honor to see that you are the first Indian-American to serve as an FCC Commissioner. That is humbling. That inspires me to want to work hard. And that makes me so grateful for, and makes me want to be worthy of, the many sacrifices that my parents and their parents made for me—without an inkling that any of this was possible. Maybe you feel the same way, too.

Thanks again for inviting me here today. I look forward to your questions.