

**REMARKS OF FCC CHAIRMAN AJIT PAI
TO THE INDIAN AMERICAN INTERNATIONAL CHAMBER OF COMMERCE**

NEW YORK, NY

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Good afternoon! It's great to be with you today. Thank you to the Consul General for hosting us. As we all know, the world's oldest democracy and its largest share common values and strategic interests. I'm grateful for this opportunity to help further the important relationship between the United States and India.

Thanks to K.V. Kumar and everyone at the Chamber for asking me to be a part of this special occasion. Congratulations on the official launch of your New York regional office. I would also like to congratulate the Chamber on your 30th anniversary, which you celebrated in September.

It truly has been an astounding 30 years. It's sometimes hard to remember how different things were for Indian-Americans back in 1989. But I came across some trivia that offers some useful perspective. In 1989, we not only saw the launch of the Chamber, we also witnessed the debut of *The Simpsons*, the longest television show of all-time and, I'll confess, one of my all-time favorites. Why is this relevant? Well, soon thereafter, for the first time ever, there was a major Indian character on a major American TV show. Of course, that character was Apu, the operator of the Kwik-E-Mart. If you were looking for a representation of an Indian-American in popular culture, a convenience store worker with a mockable accent and challenging last name was basically it—for a long, long time.

Now, think about how far we've come since then.

The Indian-American population has grown from about 800,000 in 1989 to over 4.5 million today.

The tech sector has arguably become the dominant force in our culture, and Indian-Americans are leading the way. Multiple world-leading technology companies, including Google and Microsoft, now feature Indian or Indian-American CEOs, and nearly one in four Silicon Valley startups is desi-founded.

We're gathered in the financial capital of the world, where we have Indian-Americans at the helm of major enterprises like Standard and Poor's and Mastercard. One of the people I (and many others) have drawn tremendous inspiration from, and am now privileged to call a friend, is former PepsiCo CEO Indra Nooyi. And much of the financial services workforce is being groomed at business schools led by Indian-Americans, including Harvard, NYU, and the University of Chicago. Sticking with the finance theme, an Indian-American at MIT just won the Nobel Prize for Economics.

As for Indian representation in popular culture, actors like Aziz Ansari and Mindy Kaling have starred in their own hit TV shows. An Indian-American married a Jonas Brother, and the headline was that a Jonas brother managed to marry Priyanka Chopra. In 2014, Nina Davuluri became the first Indian-American woman to win the Miss America competition. Speaking of competition, one of the fantasy football leagues in which I participate is called the Singh Chillar Beach Lal League—in honor of Indian-Americans who've played in the NFL (obviously, that could have included me, but I chose to focus on communications regulation). And earlier this year, two Indian-Americans—Kevin Negandhi and Zubin Mehenti—co-hosted ESPN's SportsCenter for the first time.

I'm not saying the Chamber deserves *all* of the credit for the progress since 1989. I would simply note that it's quite a coincidence.

Many of the success stories I've highlighted are probably familiar to this audience. I'd like to share another story that probably isn't. But I think it's emblematic of what Indian-Americans have accomplished in our country and how our country has come to embrace us.

A couple months ago, I visited Oxford, Mississippi for a conference on bridging the digital divide in rural America. Oxford is best known as the home of the University of Mississippi and an author by the name of William Faulkner. In recent years, Oxford has also earned a reputation for its food scene. On the recommendation of my hosts, I had dinner at a restaurant called SnackBar. Its executive chef had just won a James Beard Award, which is basically the culinary version of an Oscar. Not surprisingly, the meal was amazing. What did surprise me was seeing fried okra with chaat masala on the menu. As it turns out, Snackbar's award-winning chef was from Gujarat. Vishwesh Bhatt came to the United States in 1985 at age 17. He settled in Oxford in 2001 and has become a pillar of the community. As he's [put it](#), "I have chosen to make this place my home. And this place has made me feel welcome, where I can make that claim. That's the South I love."

I shared the previous story to make the following point. It's no secret that Indian-Americans make a mark in major urban centers like New York and San Francisco and in fields like technology, finance, medicine, academia, and, yes, spelling bees. What too many people don't know or appreciate is that the contributions of Indian-Americans go so much farther—even to places like Mississippi and professions like gourmet chef.

That brings me to the reason I think the Chamber is such an important organization. Yes, you work on big-picture issues to promote a healthy U.S.-India relationship, expanded trade opportunities, and economic growth. But you focus mainly on small and medium-size businesses. That's why you're in the process of opening more than 50 chapters over a two-year span. I couldn't help but notice that, in December 2018, the Chamber announced the opening of a new chapter in Mississippi. It didn't matter that Indian-Americans account for less than two-tenths of one percent of Mississippi's population; you recognized that immigrants like Vishwesh Bhatt are invaluable in their communities. However few in number, they have a large impact, and could do even more with your support. (By the way, I love the fact that an organization dedicated to expanding opportunities for Indian-Americans opened a chapter in Mississippi before today's official dedication of your New York chapter.)

The way I see it, the Chamber isn't just in the economic-development business; you're in the community-building business. You're helping to strengthen America from the bottom up, not from the top down.

If you know my background, you know why I appreciate this strategy. Today, I may get to offer a namaste or salaam at the Indian Consulate in New York City, but I grew up in a small, rural town in the southeast corner of Kansas. Parsons had about 10,000 people, and not very many of them were from the subcontinent. In those days, my parents would often get together with the handful of Indian-American families in town. But to be part of a broader Indian-American community, we had to drive far, even three hours north to Kansas City. In fact, I still have memories of going to parties hosted by an uncle or auntie but making sure we first went to what we simply called the "Indian store," so we could stock up on things like dhanias, falooda mix, or Pears glycerine soap.

Having lived it, I know how valuable it was and remains to preserve those ties to the broader Indian-American community. That's why I believe the Chamber's campaign to open chapters across the country is so important. I'm excited that you are bringing that energy to New York City. Obviously, there is a much larger community here than in Kansas, but I'm confident local entrepreneurs will benefit from all that you offer, from expertise to networking opportunities.

Congratulations again on the new chapter, and thank you for letting me a part of this celebration. Thank you again to the Consul General for hosting us.

Finally, and most importantly, I want to use this occasion to thank my family, without whom I would not be here today. My mother grew up in Bangalore, and my father was raised in Hyderabad. In 1971, they came to the United States with just a radio and eight dollars in their pockets. Like so many immigrants, they sacrificed to give me opportunities not available to them as children. And it was my grandparents who instilled in them the value of hard work and the vision to dream big. Nearly half a century after my parents' journey from India, here I am, the grandson of a spare auto parts salesman and a file clerk, having been tapped by the President of the United States to serve as the nation's chief regulator of one of the most dynamic sectors of the global economy.

Many hear this story as a quintessential tale of the Indian determination to succeed. To others, it is the American Dream manifest. I would say that they're both right. Let's vow to keep working together to keep that spirit of opportunity alive.