

Aamchi NASA

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D Purandeswari, Minister of State in the Human Resource Development Ministry, is a happy woman these days. Against all odds, and among colleagues whose incompetence is legendary, her performance is drawing raves from all over the world. Thanks to her tireless campaign, 36% of the scientists at NASA are now Indians, as are 38% of doctors in the United States, according to a statement she made to the Rajya Sabha, as reported in *The Times of India* on March 11. But wait, there is more good news! 34% of the employees at Microsoft, 28% at IBM, 17% at Intel and 13% at Xerox are Indians. Unfortunately, I was not present in the House of the Elders at this climactic moment, so I do not know how the elders reacted. I imagine that some pumped their fists (Chak De India!), others clapped, and the more sedate nodded knowingly. Aamchi NASA, finally.

Indians living in the United States are accustomed to reading such stories about themselves in the Indian media, and tend to treat them as harmless jokes. We know, from reading Indian newspapers, that we have taken over Silicon Valley, and that Americans spend much of their free time worrying about the Indian take-over of their country. We do not bother to rebut such claims, and sometimes even help to widen the gulf between perceptions of India in the US and perceptions in India about perceptions of India in the US. After all, it is we who benefit when Indians in India extol Indians in the US.

These new numbers, however, are the results of a “government survey” and were presented by a minister, so I shook myself awake. Ah, my blinkered vision! In all my years as a research scientist for NASA, how had I missed the large number of Indians – four out of ten – whom I must have passed in the hallways? Had I not noticed the hordes of Guptas, Venkats, Singhs and Srinivasans? Perhaps I was in a particularly non-Indian building, in a highly non-Indian NASA centre. Given her reputation for punctiliousness, the minister no doubt looked at the numbers from all NASA centres combined. So I went where individuals not affiliated with expensive government surveys go - to <http://nasapeople.nasa.gov/Workforce/default.htm> - and clicked on *demographic information*, which brought up a chart for the workforce profile at NASA.

There is no racial or ethnic category called “Indian” in American organizations. They usually list *White, Black, Hispanic, Asian* (meaning those from eastern Asia), *Native American, Pacific-Islander*, and *Other*. Indians usually tick the *Other* box. A few organizations use *South-Asian* or *East-Indian*, but this is uncommon even in small software companies where 36% of the engineers may indeed be Indian. Instead of *Other*, NASA uses the more polite *Unspecified*. So, I searched across all NASA centres after selecting S&E (science and engineering) employees from the chart. The number of *Unspecified* employees is zero. This perhaps means that Indians are grouped under *Asian* or *Pacific Islander*. That number is 886 out of a total of 11157. I threw in the 34 *Multiracial* employees - D Purandeswari will certainly want to claim those who have

only one Indian parent. The number of such scientists was about 8% of the total, of which a significant fraction are likely to be Indians. If you further restrict the search to those holding PhDs, the count is 293 out of 1919, which is 15%. These numbers, of course, do not tell the whole story. Many NASA scientists are sub-contractors, as was I, and are not counted as employees. Even if you include them all, however, and make the most generous assumptions about the number of Indians who have any connection with science at NASA, that number will likely lie between 3 and 6% of the science workforce. Many of these Indians will be US citizens, of course, but D Purandeswari does not fuss over detail. An exact count almost certainly does not exist, except in the government survey cited by the minister, which was probably conducted by standing outside a California theatre showing *Jodhaa Akbar* and asking everyone, “Are you a scientist at NASA?”

Now, you might ask why D Purandeswari would put her foot in her mouth over a meaningless statistic. What business does the Indian minister for higher education have with the ethnic make-up of NASA? The answer to this is far more disturbing than the fantastic numbers in her survey: she was using the number of ex-Indians at NASA to justify expenditure on higher education *in India*. We now have a clear understanding of the goals of the Department of Higher Education. Now, there is another catchy statistic which, because that is not her department, the minister perhaps does not know: 65.2%, the number of Indians counted as literate by the 2001 census. So, almost 36% of India cannot read or write, but 36% of NASA scientists are Indians. Now, all we need to do is transfer D Purandeswari to the Department of School Education and Literacy. She will work wonders with the numbers there, as she has done in her current position.

About The Author

Sujit Saraf is a novelist who lives in California, and was a research scientist for NASA for a few years. His novel, *The Peacock Throne*, was published recently by Sceptre.