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South Asians, then we
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something for my
country before I die

Kevin Kaul

The community activist spoke with Deputy
Managing Editor **Ramananda Sengupta**

Kevin Kaul wears many hats. One of the better-known community activists in the United States, he is the founder and executive director of the US-Asia Business Forum; founder and chairman of the Friends of the South Asian American Communities; founder and director, Indian Armed Forces Associations; founder and chairman, Friends of the Indo-American Communities; chairman, Federation of Indo-American Associations of Southern California; chairman, Los Angeles County Sheriff Lee Baca's Indo-American Advisory Council; and executive-vice president, South Asians in American Media.

An associate of California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, Kaul is also the chief executive officer of Kevin Kaul and Associates Inc, and CEO of Urbantec Developers and Investments (USA) Inc, which is into construction.

You recently met with Senator Hillary Clinton. What was that all about?

She is a wonderful lady who is a beauty with brains. I wish her all the success in becoming the next US President. She really cares for the middle class and is good for the US, and eventually for the whole world. She invited me to a finance committee meeting, consisting of the former governor of California, Gray Davis, February 22 in Century City [in Los Angeles] to discuss her campaign details. This committee will help her raise the money she needs for her campaign. I have committed to raise more than \$2.5 million by doing 10 events in the South Asian communities from now until the elections.

How does Kevin Kaul describe himself?

Kevin Kaul has been in the US for 15 years. What I am personally proud about is how I've mobilized the community.

At the Pravasi Divas in January in Delhi, the [Indian] prime minister [Manmohan Singh] spoke of how breakfast in Amritsar, lunch in Lahore and dinner in Kabul was the future of our grandchildren. That is what our prime minister is working on, and that is what Kevin Kaul is also working on. That's why I am the chairman of the Friends of South Asian Communities, mobilizing all the five million South Asians in the US — people from India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Mauritius, Burma, Bhutan. We've been very successful over the past four years in putting together events on India's Independence Day.

We've had Senator John Kerry as our chief guest, and we've put up a show for Senator Hillary Clinton also, about a year-and-a-half ago, a very successful one and raised \$100,000 so far. I have been instrumental in putting together the Bangladesh Sheriff's council, Pakistani Sheriff's council, the Indo-American Sheriff's council and Sri Lankan Sheriff's council. So as South Asians, we have more voice, we are working with our Congressmen to have a census exclusively for South Asians, separately from Asians.

We've got to get out of the Asian mindset and call ourselves South Asians, then we have a better voice and better opportuni-

ties in the US.

The second thing I am proud of is my attempt to [invest in] India. In 2000, I wanted to bring almost \$1 billion in investment to India for a project in Navi Mumbai [in Maharashtra state]. The financing was in place. Unfortunately, we could not start the project because one organization said that a bridge was coming up between Bombay and New Bombay, putting the plan on hold. I'm still working on it.

Let's rewind further, to the time before you came to the US.

I am a Kashmiri Pandit born in Calcutta. I did my engineering degree from the Regional Engineering College-Warangal, near Hyderabad, which is the number four engineering college in India today. Then I joined the Indian Navy, where I was a Senior Lieutenant, from the first batch of short service commission officers, I had the option of staying back for 20 years or seven years, but I opted out. I joined the World Bank project to build the Nhava Sheva Port.

Thereafter, I went to the US to do my MBA in South Dakota. I [became involved with] the Los Angeles [South Asian] community when I realized that the leadership was too fragmented between the old [and new guard] — people who have been there for 30 to 40 years, and the new people who are coming in. The same 20 or 30 people want to control the community organizations for the past 30 to 40 years, but do not do anything for the South Asian or Indian-American communities, other than hold titles. That is when I took the lead and separated myself from these major organizations. That is when the FOSAAC was born. From FOSAAC was born the US Asia Business Forum. We got an overwhelming response. This was done in partnership with FICCI [Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry], the mayor of Los Angeles, the California governor's office, the US Department of Commerce. A representative from the White House also attended.

What purpose do events like the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas, which you attended in Delhi in January, serve?

The PBD's purpose is more culture than business. The people who go for it go for fun. That also has been stopped this year. Unlike earlier PBDs, I didn't see any cultural program during the day, and I don't know why they have stopped it. That was one of the attractions. If you are thinking it is more investment-oriented, then the bureaucrats and politicians should understand that the US system involves people replying to their e-mails. People don't believe in replying to e-mails [in India], neither the secretaries, nor the politicians. So there will be no results until they become e-mail-savvy. No non-resident Indian is going to chase these politicians, calling them from the US or Canada or wherever. All major international competitive bidding contracts from India, on which [foreign investment] will be based, should be [available on] a nationwide centralized processing system. This should be sent out to all NRIs who participate in such bidding and the databases made available at offices



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all over the country. Eventually, there has to be a tender process. To have that, there has to be a system. Just talking about it at events like the PBD has not led to any investments. The politicians and bureaucrats talk without defining the role of how to bring in investment. The process is never discussed. I've gone through the process, and it lasts two or three years.

So, the first PBD, which was more culture than business, was ideal?

Exactly. That was the best one, put forward by FICCI, which did a great job. Since then, it has not grown. The respect NRIs had at that time, the way they treated us then, was much better than today. The hospitality, the volunteer system, etc, they were really hand-holding us at that time. Not any more.

As a businessman, what are the main obstacles you see in India?

Information flow is one of the critical disadvantages of India. I have been involved in bidding for some of these ICB contracts, so I know from experience that information flow has to be much better than it is at this point. It's part of the flaws of the bureaucracy that the outreach is not there. Like I said earlier, they said the bridge is coming up, based on which I was bringing in \$1 billion. The funding was in place, but then they said they can't start construction. So I wasted four years. If they had told me in the tender document that the bridge may not come up, then I might have acted differently. Then, the judicial system there is not as good as the US, where you get a decision in favor or against very fast.

As an NRI, have you ever faced conflicts of loyalty?

Not really. Being an Indian, and working

in the community, you know people know my name. I do it because of my background in the defense forces, because of my loyalty to my country. I have given the prime time of my life to the defense of this nation [India]. I'm 45 today, and I feel that I've got to do something for my country before I die. To ensure that it gets at least 20 years behind the US. Right now it is more than 30 years behind China and 50 or 60 years behind the US.

If you could, what would change about India, and the Pravasi Divas?

Fix Air-India. Privatize it. That is number one. The first ambassador that we have of our nation is Air-India but it is pathetic. In Los Angeles, it doesn't leave on time, the police are called regularly because the passengers get rowdy due to the delays. Flights are delayed by as much as 24 hours, and they say it is fog related. That's not an excuse for a nation that wants to call itself a superpower. I've been hearing about this fog over Delhi for many years. But there's technology available, nowhere else in the world have I heard that flights have been delayed just because of fog. So if you have \$200 billion sitting in the bank, you must buy Instrument Landing Systems and whatever else it takes to buy a better name for India. That's what the first thing any investor is going to look at, the infrastructure. As for the PBD, my suggestion would be, and I said this publicly last year, the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs is not the organization that should control it. The ministry's mindset is as Indian as all the other ministries. So the PBD should be controlled by an advisory board of major community activists or entrepreneurs all over the world.