

Nikki Haley seizes the moment to become the first from Sikh heritage to be in Trump's Cabinet

Shinder Singh Thandi

On November 23, a day before Thanksgiving, American Sikhs received a gift to be proud of – the nomination of Nikki Haley to become US Ambassador to the UN. She and her Sikh parents represent a migrant success story – a story where anyone can live the American Dream. It is indeed a remarkable achievement and also goes some way in bridging the growing gap between the number of Sikhs serving at highest levels of public office in America and Canada across the border, the latter having 4 serving Sikhs in Justin Trudeau's cabinet. She will be a role model for Sikh and non-Sikh women alike and potentially increase Indian-American participation in political life.

The American Sikh story starts with the *San Francisco Chronicle* in April 1899 recording the first official report on arrival of Sikhs in California. It took 57 years for the first Sikh to become a Congressman- Dalip Singh Saund was elected in 1956 and served till 1963. Now, 60 years later President-elect Donald J. Trump has nominated Nikki Haley, a person of Sikh heritage, to be the US Ambassador to the UN and member of his cabinet. There is absolutely no reason why this nomination should not be endorsed by Congress in January when President Trump takes oath.

Nikki – birth name Nimrata 'Nikki' Randhawa - has developed a knack for breaking records. She became the first member of a minority community and first female Governor of South Carolina in 2010, at only 42 years of age, was still the youngest Governor winning a second term in 2014. Unlike most other US politicians of Indian-heritage, including Saund, she has risen through the ranks of the Republican Party rather than the Democrats. Now she becomes the first politician of South Asian, Indian, and Sikh heritage to become a member of the Cabinet.

Nikki Haley's parents – Ajit Singh Randhawa and Raj Kaur Randhawa - hailed from the Amritsar district of Punjab and her father migrated to Canada on a doctoral scholarship and then shifted to USA to take up an academic position in a private college in South Carolina. Nikki was born and grew up in Bamberg, South Carolina, with its back-drop of racism and American race politics not far away. She has three siblings – a sister and two brothers, all becoming high achievers in their own right. Helping with her mother's clothing business from an early age, she graduated from Clemson University, majoring in Accounting. After gaining employment experience, she re-joined her mother's successful and diversified multi-million business in a professional capacity, becoming Chief Finance Officer. She had acquired sufficient experience in South Carolina state politics before deciding to run for Governor. Unlike Bobby Jindal, a former Republican Governor, Nikki is proud of her Indian roots and her parent's Sikh faith. She married Michael Haley in 1996 whom she met as a fellow student and apparently due to her conversion to Christianity, still settled on two marriage ceremonies – a Sikh and Methodist.

Nikki Haley quickly learned skills of successful political leadership and in reconciling competing economic and political interests and established herself as a popular and loyal servant of the GOP as well as a public servant. As a conservative, her policies focussed on cutting taxes, reducing public debt and big government and job creation through promoting growth in the private sector and encouraging inward investment. In June 2015, she received international praise for her decision to ban the Confederate flag from all of South Carolina's government offices and grounds in the aftermath of the Charleston Massacre which ended in the killing of nine African-American children. Her critics called her opportunistic and an ambitious politician and asked why it took her so long to understand the symbolism of bigotry inherent in the Confederate flag. She was also highly pro-active in selling South Carolina to global markets, leading many trade and investment missions, including to

India. In her first visit to India and ancestral homeland of Punjab, not only did she make a point of paying obeisance at the Darbar Sahib, Amritsar, but also discussed possibilities of mutual trade and investment opportunities between South Carolina and Punjab. Her record of good governance during her first term, enabled her to win a second term and gain national reputation within the GOP. She was chosen last January to provide the Republican response to Barack Obama's last State of the Union address and soon began to be touted as a potential Presidential candidate. Maybe her appointment as US Ambassador to UN will make that a reality in future years – perhaps in 2020 or 2024?

However nobody should be under any doubt about the tremendous challenges she is likely to face. As is well known her first pick during the primaries was Rubio and when he withdrew, she switched to Cruz and when he was ousted, she reluctantly said she would vote for Trump, not because she agreed with his policies, but because she had to be loyal to a Republican nominee. In fact in many public statements she strongly distanced herself from Trump and his politics of bigotry and division, although previously she had aligned herself with the Tea Party which was equally bigoted. Added to this, as many critics of her appointment have pointed out, she has no foreign policy or diplomatic experience. As the argument goes, it is one thing to be marketing your state but entirely another to be an ambassador to the world given its multitude of complexities. It will indeed be a challenge for her, on the one hand, to deal with demands of President Trump and whoever is nominated as Secretary of State, as there is a high probability that neither will have foreign policy experience, and on the other, the political posturing by Russia, China, EU, India and Middle-eastern states embroiled in the vicious civil war going on in Iraq and Syria. Her loyalty to Trump and USA is likely to be severely tested. If she comes out this without being bruised, it will be a sure step towards her ambition to be President.

The UN is a parliament of nations and just as within a nation, the UN and its numerous agencies are subjected to daily lobbying by all sorts of corporate and civil society groups, especially disaffected diaspora groups. One thing is for certain. Sikh advocacy groups, especially those who have developed a strong and populist anti-India and anti-Punjab narrative and harbour separatist sentiments from the comfort of their US homes, will be tempted to appropriate her as a Sikh warrior or mock her if she shows indifference. It will be interesting to see how she responds and if she allows herself to be distracted by the tension between her emotional link to her parental religion or ethnicity and her upbringing as an American first. These are interesting times and let us hope that, not only Nikki Haley lives up to the meaning of her Sikh name and the important Sikh value of humility but also that sections of the US Sikh community also show the same behaviour towards her and give her a fair chance to build a record of success. But I am sure this will be the least of her concerns as she prepares for the challenges ahead.

The writer is a Visiting Professor in Global Studies at UC Santa Barbara