



Raina with some of the children he works with

Forging Ahead

Indian-Americans have kept the flag flying high even far from home. A look at a few Atlantans who have earned the respect of the community.

According to the 2005 US Census, some 79,000 Indian-Americans reside in the state of Georgia. It is a vibrant and a fast growing demographic group that has almost doubled its numbers in the last 5 years. The community has made a significant contribution to their host culture and some of its most eminent faces have forged ahead, setting the standards for not just their brethren but for American society at large.

Robin Raina came to the US four years ago from Mumbai. Reminiscing today in his swanky office on the 32nd floor of the Concourse building in northern Atlanta where he leads Ebix, Inc, an international developer and supplier of software and e-commerce solutions to the insurance industry, Raina says, "I saw that our Mumbai office was surrounded by slums. And what was moving was that I had been visiting this place for almost a year and had failed to notice them. It was a moment of realisation." It was that moment of

epiphany that led Raina to create the Robin Raina Foundation, a charitable organisation devoted to supporting underprivileged children in India.

For a person who describes himself as "perennially discontented," it was also an opportunity to get into the business of making charity fashionable. Raina has roped in the who's who of the Indian celebrity circuit, including singers Asha Bhosle, Ghulam Ali, and Manna Dey; Bollywood singing sensations Sonu Nigam and Shaan; filmstars Preity Zinta, Saif Ali Khan and Akshay Kumar to perform at the foundation's events.

Today, he is involved in numerous initiatives like the Raina-Prayas School in Delhi, which has adopted 400 slum children; the Udaan project, which sponsors the education of 175 girl children in Mumbai; the Udaan Ghar Project, also in Mumbai, which houses 32 orphan girls; the Blind Aid Project, which sponsors 50 blind children in Delhi; the Raina-



Patel (above) is the chairman of Georgia's first Indian-owned bank; (right) Sheth is a new-age marketing guru

Khushii Home, a joint collaboration with cricketer Kapil Dev, which provides assistance to senior citizens and underprivileged children; and Ward No 224 at the Shaukat Khanum Cancer Hospital, founded by cricketer Imran Khan, in Lahore, Pakistan, which sponsors treatment of children suffering from cancer.

This is no mean feat for a man whose time literally translates into money. Ebix recently made it to the 19th position in the coveted *Fortune* list of America's 100 fastest-growing small public companies. Yet, Raina is often to be found in Atlanta's supermarkets, promoting his charity events, and talking to people.

Mukesh "Mike" Patel too has made a difference to the community, albeit in a different way. Patel is the chairman of the state's first Indian-owned bank, Haven Trust Bank, which opened in January, 2000. A small community bank that seeks to change the impersonal service rendered by large banks, especially to small business owners, it operates three branches in the state and has assets worth \$300 million. "We are a small bank that's big on service, especially to the Asian, Hispanic, and African American populations and small business entrepreneurs," emphasises Patel.

Patel is also the president of the Diplomat Hotel Company, which he helped start in 1981 and now operates 18 properties in four states. In 2000, he became the first In-

dian to be appointed by President Bill Clinton to serve on the White House Advisory Commission on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. He currently also serves on the Eisenhower Commission which was originally created by former US president Lyndon Johnson to tackle issues of crime and poverty.

Leading the Indian community in the marketing world is Dr Jagdish Sheth. An internationally acknowledged academic, Sheth has continuously re-defined himself as a marketing guru, corporate strategist and geo-political advisor. Sheth's 2002 release, *The Rule of Three: Surviving and Thriving in Competitive Markets*, was selected as a runner-up for the 2004 Berry-AMA Book prize by the American Marketing Association.

The Charles H. Kellstadt Professor of Marketing, at Emory University's Goizueta Business School, Sheth got his first marketing lessons helping around with the family business of jewellery box manufacturing. "Early on in life, I understood how the world worked. That insight was especially precious when I studied various marketing theories," he says.

Elsewhere, Harsha Agadi, president and CEO of the Atlanta-based Church's Chicken, has set the pace for the food industry with his innovative leadership. Since he took over Church's Chicken in December 2004, annual sales have hit \$1 billion. His introduction of new products have helped the restaurant chain move from negative growth to sales increases and effective strategies have helped cut costs.



A proud Mumbaitee, Agadi's no-nonsense style of management is grounded in the years he spent at Arya Vidya Mandir, where he was brought up in an atmosphere that blended Eastern philosophy with a Cambridge-style education. But Agadi always knew that he would go to the US, get an MBA from a top-10 business school, and run large American companies. Accordingly, he bought a one-way ticket from Mumbai to the US in 1987, received his MBA from Duke University and has since strategically steered the likes of American corporate giants such as Kraft Foods, PepsiCo, Domino's, Little Caesar's—and now Church's Chicken—with aplomb. "I was very enamoured by the fact that my father ran a very large company in India. He was my hero and I wanted to go down that path," says Agadi.

It has been the contributions of such visionaries that has earned the Indian-American community in Atlanta the goodwill and respect of their hosts. ■