

BLACK ISSUES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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- Coverage of the 2nd annual *Black Issues* conference, Pg. 22
- The making of a liberal arts professor, Pg. 24
- South Asian scholars who make their academic home at HBCUs, Pg. 34

Exceeding Expectations

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BY SHILPA BANERJI

Renu Khator was born into a conservative Indian family in Farukhabad in Uttar Pradesh, India. At 18, an arranged marriage brought her to the United States, where she had the opportunity to pursue her dreams of graduate school. Thirty years later, Khator has far exceeded her own academic expectations, becoming the first female provost and vice president of academic affairs at the University of South Florida.

After nearly two decades of years of working her way up the academic ladder, the only Indian-born administrator at a major Florida university — and one of the very few in the country — has developed an optimistic approach and a keen

ability to listen. She also brought with her an ambitious to-do list: empower the faculty, make USF a top-rated research institution, increase the diversity of undergraduate students and put academics at the heart of everything.

Khator stopped teaching full time in 2001 but continues to write research papers on global public administration, environmental policy and South Asian politics. She cites both her public policy background and extended family as part of her holistic approach to resolving problems. Just over a year after she was appointed, *Black Issues* visited Khator at the university's campus in Tampa and spoke with her about her goals for the university, the impact of globalization on U.S. colleges and universities and dispelling stereotypes about Indians and other South Asians.

BI: *What were your main goals when you were appointed provost?*

RK: We just finished the strategic plan for the university and the goal is to be among the top 50 research universities in the country in five years. To do that, my objective basically was to make sure that we have two fronts covered — the faculty front and the student front.

I wanted to make sure that the faculty could get the best infrastructure possible to succeed, because overall recruitment for the last three years has been absolutely phenomenal. Now that we have attracted the best and the brightest, it becomes my responsibility to give them that working environment in which they can succeed.

I also wanted to make sure that we could connect with the students who come here. So it (student affairs) was put together with student life ... We made that shift last year. The reason was that I wanted to make sure, first of all, that we increased the quality and diversity of the students that we attract here. And once they're here, I wanted to make sure that they succeed, because our retention rates were not quite as good. So that became another banner for us, to say that when we get a student here they should not have any excuse that classes are not available. We should have everything possible to help them succeed. So that's my other goal.

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BI: *What aspects of the job are most rewarding to you?*

RK: The most rewarding job is really to recruit the faculty, and we've done that. This year we are searching for close to 200 faculty in the USF system. That day is just the most exciting day for me when I get to meet with the new faculty, because that tells me where we are in the national scene, the kind of recruits that we are able to get here.

And then, to see what they are able to accomplish in classrooms with the students. That's another very thrilling experience. So, I would say the best part is the part that I spend with the faculty and trying to see how is it that I can help them to do what they are here for, which is to educate and to really extend their horizons of knowledge.

BI: *You have had a long association with USF, so looking back, what was the appeal of the university for you? Was it both personal and professional? And as a young scholar, did you aspire to become an administrator?*

RK: No, actually not at all. That wasn't part of my dream. When I was growing up in India, having a career wasn't a part of my dream. I'm a Marwari (a fairly conservative class) but that's not how I was raised. But one thing I knew, I loved education. The university atmosphere excited me always, but administration was never actually part of my thing whatsoever. My husband and I both, we weren't even looking at USF. We didn't even know USF existed, in all honesty, 20 years ago. We came to a conference in Orlando, and we met some professors from USF who said, "You have to come take a look at USF. It's a budding university. It's a great university." So we came here, and then we thought, okay, Florida is a nice place. Maybe we should stay here, see the state and then move on.

So it's not that we never thought about leaving. As a matter of fact, I was in the pool nationally when I was going for the search here for the dean, and I did have other offers, but in the end it turned out to be the best fit for my talents and my skills, and the university valued what I had to offer.



BI: *What in your background makes you well-suited for the provost position, and do you feel a sense of responsibility for being a pioneer?*

RK: I never think of myself as a pioneer. I would say I've never planned my life, and maybe that has been the thrill of it, because whatever I have I just put my heart and soul in it, and the doors open.

For an administrative job, I think I have very solid grounding in the goal of the faculty, the academic piece of it. That is the unwavering foundation that I have.

But the other thing that is important is my training as a public policy person. That helps me, because I have noticed when I see an issue, I go at it just like I would do for my research. I take a comprehensive look, and then I

Dr. Renu Khator

- **Title:** Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs, University of South Florida
- **Education:** B.A., Liberal Arts, Kanpur University, India, 1973; M.A., Political Science, Purdue University, 1975; Ph.D., Political Science/Public Administration, Purdue University, 1985
- **Selected Awards:** Teaching Incentive Program Award (1994); Honorary Research Fellowship, Centre for Contemporary Asian Studies, Chinese University of Hong Kong (1989-1990); Outstanding Indian of Tampa Bay (1999)

Asian/Pacific Islander Employees in Degree-Granting Institutions: Fall 2001

	Total	Men	Women	Full-time	Public Part-time	Private 4-Year	Public 4-Year	Private 2-Year
Total	148,945	76,269	72,676	99,844	49,101	89,834	41,230	16,889
Professional Staff	111,797	61,866	49,931	70,717	41,080	69,445	30,652	10,956
Executive/Administrative/Managerial Faculty (Instruction and Research)	3,662	1,909	1,753	3,541	121	1,471	1,643	462
Instruction and Research Assistants	54,869	35,447	19,422	38,026	16,843	29,045	15,954	9,398
Non-Faculty Professionals	20,442	11,638	8,804	X	20,442	17,156	3,260	25
Nonprofessional Staff	32,824	12,872	19,952	29,150	3,674	21,773	9,795	1,071
	37,148	14,403	22,745	29,127	8,021	20,389	10,578	5,933

SOURCE: NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS, DIGEST OF EDUCATION STATISTICS, 2003

make a decision and I'm very good about that. I do not look back and regret my decision, fret over it at all, good or bad. Nobody here can say that I don't make decisions. They might say I may have made wrong decisions, but not bad decisions.

Two other things that I have reflected on — I do think they help me in my job today — are my upbringing in India and my extended family. Because what you learn in an extended family is that you really cannot lead, or at least as a woman. You cannot simply order things around. You cannot scream and yell and get what you want. You really need to sort of work through the system. You need to inspire others. You need to sell your idea. You need to work as a team.

BI: *How were you received as the first female provost and what advice would you give to other women aspiring to positions in higher education?*

RK: There were people who wanted to watch and see ... to see whether you'll succeed or whether you will have the guts to do gutsy things. I could sense it. My thing has been, "Well, the task has to be done." Of course, you are going to always make some people unhappy.

I think generally what people say here is I never tried to get up and say, "Here I am on my horse and you all come behind me." I generally say, "You all go, and I'm sort of just pushing from the back," and I'm there. And it seems to work. I have the highest respect for the faculty, for what they do as creative people. They have never let me down. I'm very proud of them.

BI: *What is your advice for professional women?*

RK: I always told my daughters that as a woman you have something extra special. Never let go of those characteristics that you bring to the table as a woman. There was a time when women had to behave like men. I just don't think those times are here today. I have never done that.

I am very proud about talking about family. I'm very comfortable talking about my children. So what I would say is, women make,

oftentimes, better managers because there are certain qualities that they bring to the table, a collaborativeness, a more holistic view, the ability to put themselves in other people's shoes.

BI: *Comparing the higher education systems of India and the United States, what aspects of the Indian system do you think that the U.S. could adopt to better prepare students?*

RK: Well, I think one thing that helped me tremendously — I did my bachelor's in political science in India. It built a very strong theoretical foundation. But here it was more informal and it was more practical. Having the foundation first helped me really hone the skills in practice. I think here we have to give a little more emphasis to building a very solid (theoretical) foundation for students.

The second thing I liked in the system in India was the tutorial approach, which we somehow don't have here. You could have a massive lecture, but then the big group broke down into 15 or 20 people. You have more personal attention. And now in research universities, you sometimes see class sizes of 300, 400, sometimes even 600 or 1,000 students. There are graduate assistants, but they don't necessarily function in the same tutorial mode.

BI: *What do you think is the biggest stereotype that Indians face in this country? Have you encountered any of those barriers or stereotypes?*

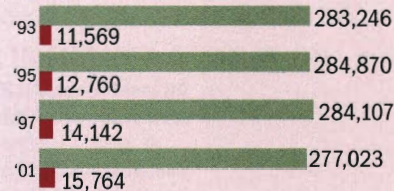
RK: I think the biggest stereotype is that we are just very good in math and science, (that) all Indians have a tremendous math and science skill. To begin with, I'm not in one of those fields. I'm not in engineering, I'm not in computer science, I'm not in medicine, so I broke that barrier even at that time. I mean, Indians don't come for political science. I had an opportunity to change, especially for medicine, if I wanted, but I love my discipline and I just wanted to stay there.

The other thing about the Indian stereotype is that parents really control their children's educational lives. It is a positive message that they stay very engaged and very involved, which is true. ... But at the same time, I think

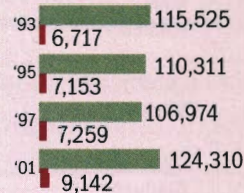
Full-time Asian American/ Pacific Islander Faculty by Tenure Status

■ Total
■ Asian American

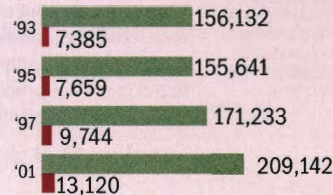
TENURED



NONTENURED, ON TENURE TRACK



NONTENURED, NOT ON TENURE TRACK



Note: Details may not add to total because of rounding. Faculty data by tenure status and race are not available at the national level for 1999.

SOURCE: AMERICAN COUNCIL ON EDUCATION, 21ST STATUS REPORT ON MINORITIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION; THEY RECEIVED THEIR DATA FROM THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS - INTEGRATED POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION DATA SYSTEM (IPEDS), FALL STAFF SURVEY, 1993 TO 2001.

it's about push, you know, when the Indian student here says they want to go into medicine, the first thing is that your parents are pushing you for it.

So I think for Indians, the biggest challenge and the biggest break in the stereotype is for them to know, for their parents to know, for the community to know, that there is a whole world out there to explore and to find what you like to do best in your life. And if it happens to be playing drums, like the son of my best friend here, so be it. I think it's a great thing.

A lot of times I have noticed bright brains who do not want to take the leadership roles. That's another barrier that I ended up breaking because I was introduced to the world of administration through an administrative intern-



Total Fall Enrollment in Higher Education for Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders

	1991	1995	2001
All Institutions, All Races	14,324,659	14,192,155	15,927,987
All Institutions, Asian Americans/PI	610,446	759,176	937,953
Four-Year Institutions	358,526	458,692	548,727
Two-Year Institutions	251,131	300,420	389,226
Men	311,052	373,722	441,035
Women	299,365	385,454	496,918
Public	497,622	609,117	749,492
Private *	112,823	150,059	188,461
Undergraduate	539,853	660,327	816,860
Graduate	52,039	70,165	85,948
First-Professional	20,109	28,684	35,145

SOURCE: AMERICAN COUNCIL ON EDUCATION, 21ST STATUS REPORT ON MINORITIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION; THEY RECEIVED THEIR DATA FROM THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS - INTEGRATED POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION DATA SYSTEM (IPEDS), FALL ENROLLMENT SURVEY, 1991 TO 2001 (ANALYSIS BY AUTHOR).

Note: Data may not match previous reports because, in previous reports, race/ethnicity unknown persons were imputed across standard racial/ethnic groups. Data not comparable to data for years not shown in this report, but found in previous reports.

* Includes not-for-profit and for-profit institutions.

About the University of South Florida

- **Location:** Tampa (main campus), St. Petersburg, Lakeland and Sarasota/Manatee
- **History:** Main campus founded 1956; first classes in 1960
- **Degrees Offered:** Undergraduate and graduate/doctoral/professional degrees conferred in all majors
- **Ethnic Background:** Non-resident Aliens (4.6 percent); Black (11.3 percent); American Indian (0.4 percent); Asian/Pacific Islander (5.2 percent); Hispanic (9.9 percent); and White (66.7 percent)
- **Enrollment:** 42,590 undergraduate and graduate/professional students. Class of 2004: 17,204 (men) and 25,386 (women)

SOURCE: WWW.USF.EDU

ship program. I guess because of my public policy background I just always had an opinion on an issue.

But now we are seeing that a lot of Indians are coming on the political scene. I've seen doctors who are taking television spots now, there are several deans now, and there are also provosts now ... This is going to help our children see some role models in leadership as well, not just simply do the brain work.

BI: Do you sense a feeling of "Indian envy" in terms of outsourcing? Did you ever find any resistance among Americans to accept Indians as more than software engineers and doctors?

RK: From my point of view, I have definitely seen questions being raised. They will say, 'well, now the Indians are taking over all these technical jobs.' And I say, 'well, nobody questioned when all of the Indians were leaving their country to contribute to the brain power here.' If it's a global world, there is going to be competition both ways, so what are we afraid of? We just have to rise up here in America and do different kinds of things.

I have recently done research work and

Full-Time Asian American/Pacific Islander Administrators in Higher Education

	1993		1995		1999		2001	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
Total	137,711	100.0%	140,556	100.0%	158,726	100.0%	145,371	100.0%
Asian American/PI	2,243	1.6%	2,511	1.8%	3,332	2.1%	3,541	2.4%
Men	1,244	0.9%	1,388	1.0%	1,718	1.1%	1,847	1.3%
Women	999	0.7%	1,123	0.8%	1,614	1.0%	1,694	1.2%

NOTE: DETAILS MAY NOT ADD TO TOTALS BECAUSE OF ROUNDING.

presented in different conferences on outsourcing and call centers in India. Personally, I haven't faced that kind of a thing, that they do not like India or they resent Indians yet. But I think if they do, they will have to get adjusted very quickly because the phenomenon from India and China is not disappearing soon. Both countries are very well situated and I think they have placed emphasis on English as a second language and higher education, particularly India. ... And India was at the right time, the right place, with the right tools to really take advantage of this new global technological wave. And I think it's here to stay. So, if people are feeling that way, it becomes im-

portant for us to educate.

BI: Your life's philosophy is, "When life gives you lemons and everyone else is busy making lemonade, think about making margaritas!" Can you explain the times in your life when you had to do that?

RK: Every life is bound to give lemons. It's just a part of life. The important thing is to basically take lessons from whatever it has been. Look at the positive thing. I just believe in looking at the glass as half full. And every time I just bounce back and move on, and then bounce back again and move on. ■