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Washington, Mar. 31 (NNN): For the first time in the history of the American Senate a country-focused caucus called 'Friends of India' has been formed, it was announced here on Tuesday.

Announcement of the new bipartisan organisation was made Senator John Cornyn, the driving force behind the move and a freshman Republican Senator from Texas who recently visited India.

The New outfit is believed to be similar to the 10-year-old Congressional Caucus on India and Indian Americans in the US House of Representatives.

It is gathered here that some of the most powerful and influential lawmakers like Senator Orrin Hatch, chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, Charles Grassley, head of the Finance Committee, Thad Cochran, chairman of the Appropriations Committee -- all Republicans -- and **leading Democrats like Senators Paul Sarbanes, Joe Lieberman, and Edward M Kennedy** have all enthusiastically agreed to be part of the 'Friends of India' Caucus.

Cornyn, who was the keynote speaker at the Second Annual Capitol Hill Gala Dinner of the American Association of Physicians of Indian Origin on Tuesday night following AAPI's two-day legislative conference, disclosed that **co-chairing 'Friends of India' in the US Senate would be Democratic Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton of New York.**

He further said that Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, Tennessee Republican and **Minority Leader Thomas Dache, South Dakota Democrat had also agreed to become members of the Friends of India** group and so had 18 other Senators from both sides of the aisle.

Cornyn disclosed that he “undertook the job of creating an India Caucus in the US Senate, because of the incredible experience I had in India and because of the importance of US-India relations.”

The Senator added: "The response has been really outstanding across the political spectrum to the formation of such a Caucus and to me that says a lot to work on the good relationship we have in the Senate toward promoting ties between our two democracies."

Cornyn regretted that it was unfortunate that over the years, and particularly during the Cold War years, despite both the US and India being democracies with so much in

common 'did not have good relations', and described it 'as an accident of history', which has to be put right. "We have to make up for lost time," he added.

Indian Ambassador Lalit Mansingh who has been promoting the idea of the Friends of India Caucus in the US Senate among Indian American groups said he was ecstatic over the news.

Present at the AAPI dinner, as Cornyn was announcing the launch, Mansingh said he had been in touch with the Senators and others over forming such a group. He told rediff.com: "I have to commend all the Indian leaders of the Indian American community that finally made this happen."

"Cornyn came back very charged after his trip to India and said 'I want to do something to promote US-India relations' and so we said 'this is something you can do'," the Indian envoy said, adding: "So we were in contact with him."

"Even though he was aware of the formation of such a group I wanted them to say it," Mansingh said. He said there would be a formal launch.