

INDIAN DIASPORA – CURRENT SCENARIO AND ITS SOCIO-CULTURAL IMPACTS WITH REFERENCE TO AP

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The term diaspora is prevalent in current academic discourses. It is a historically contingent term originating from the “Greek word (*διασπορα*), which meant to ‘disperse’ or literally to ‘sow over’...originally a neutral word merely indicating geographical dispersion” (Brown 2006, 3). Once translated to English the word is interpreted differently.

India as we are aware is a country known for its unity in diversity. The rich cultural heritage, tradition, rites, rituals, customs, languages, dress and food stands us apart. It is also to be noted that it was not through conquests or forceful means but through peace and peaceful means that Buddhism spread all through South East Asia and other parts of Asia. The noble ideals and ideologies of the Vedas which were enriched by Buddhism have helped in enhancing the culture and civilization of many countries and today they share the same great Indian thoughts. Now this could not have been possible if it was not for the movement of the Indians. Indian contacts with the Western world date back to prehistoric times. Trade relations, preceded by the migration of peoples, inevitably developed into cultural relations. This view is not only amply supported by both philological and archaeological evidence, but by a vast body of corroborative literary evidence as well: Vedic literature and the Jatakas, Jewish chronicles, and the accounts of Greek historians all suggest contact between India and the West (www.hinduwisdom). Taxila was a great center of commerce and learning. "Crowds of eager scholars flowed to it for instruction in the three Vedas and in the eighteen branches of knowledge." Tradition affirms that the great epic, the Mahabharata, was first recited in the city." (Majumdar et al. 1946, 64) Buddha is reputed to have studied in Taxila. Pythagorean and Platonic philosophy owe their origin to Indian thought and spirituality (www.hinduwisdom). It is clear that since ages, many of the Indians have been travelling to other countries. The reason for this movement ranges from spreading the religion to work as indentured labour to seeking better prospects. Presently no matter where we all are scattered across the globe, we are brought closer through the medium of films, songs, concerts and of course the diasporic literature.

The Indian diaspora is particularly interesting as it is the second largest diaspora to China; with over 20 million people worldwide (Walton-Roberts 2004, 1-34). This makes immediately evident the significant nature of the Indian diaspora based on sheer size alone. Furthermore, the Indian diaspora can be considered one of the most diverse diaspora. It is a microcosm of India, encompassing diverse religions, for instance Hindus, Sikhs, Christians, Jains and Muslims as well as regionally distinct cultures and ethnicities such as Punjabis, Gujaratis, Kannadigas, Telugus and Bengalis just to name a few.

Trade, political and religious links have necessitated regular contacts with southeast, eastern and central Asia, and Africa. However, with the advent of colonial rule, the imperial needs for labour required substantial migration of labour from India to the plantation colonies in the West Indies, Ceylon, Southeast Asia, Mauritius, Fiji and South Africa. The bulk of these migrants went as indentured labourers. Kingsley Davis estimates that about 30 million Indians emigrated between 1834 and 1947 (Davis 1951, 173-74). This scale of movement was as large as the European migration to the Americas in the 19th century. It declined with the ending of indenture in 1921. However, a significant free migration did continue between India and Ceylon, Africa and Southeast Asia. Most of this migration was of unskilled labour. While this was the picture of India under British,

International migration from independent India indicates two distinct types of labour migration:

- a. People with technical skills and professional expertise migrate to countries such as the USA, Canada, UK and Australia as permanent migrants (since the early 1950s but it is also well known that Swami Vivekananda visited USA in 1890 *Swami Vivekananda lectured in several cities across the United States on the essence of Hinduism: the Vedanta philosophy. In 1895, after receiving pressing invitations to England, he left for London where he continued his series of lectures and classes. After this, he returned to USA, and then back to England, and also other European countries, spreading the seeds of Vedanta farther and deeper -www.rockmemorial.org*)
- b. Unskilled and semi-skilled workers migrate to oil exporting countries of the Middle East on temporary contracts, especially following the oil price increases of 1973–74 and 1979.

Members of the Indian diaspora have become known as Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) or People of Indian Origin (PIO) denoting “a transition from years of neglect to officially and formally recognizing the role of NRIs and PIOs in India’s development and global engagement” (Walton-Roberts 2004, 56). In September 2000, the Indian government founded a High Level Committee (HLC) on the Indian diaspora in addition to creating a ministerial position relating solely to NRI affairs (Walton-Roberts, 2004; Sahoo, 2006; Chattarji, 2007). The Indian government has been motivated by the perception of its diaspora “as a source of foreign exchange, investment and entrepreneurial activities, and as a market put[ing] various policies in place aimed at forging formal economic links with Non-Resident Indians” (Voigt-Graf, 2005, 375).

State governments have followed suit also implementing diaspora specific investment policies (Voigt-Graf, 2005, 365-84). Investment policies have been met with mixed success. “In 1999, India was the largest global receiver of remittances, receiving some US\$ 9 billion out of an estimated world-wide total of more than US\$ 61 billion” (Voigt-Graf, 2005, 378). However, remittances and investment have since dwindled (Chaturvedi 2007, 34-53). The Indian government had hoped that their diaspora would prove as lucrative to the national economy as the Chinese diaspora is to China (Singh 2003, 197-222).

However, the actions of the Indian government have not affected the diaspora uniformly. As mentioned, the Indian diaspora is highly heterogeneous. There is a tendency among scholars to refer to a ‘global’ Indian diaspora but as Friesen (2008, 46) highlights, the “problem with the concept of the ‘global Indian diaspora’ is that the term itself suggests a greater degree of

homogeneity than is actually the case”. Singh (2003, 4-5) goes as far to say “what possibly distinguishes the Indian diaspora from its counterparts is its extreme heterogeneity, diversity and in some cases, a persistent localism – a plurality”. Werbner (2002) attributes this to the fact that diaspora are widely assumed to be unified, homogenised and high organised social networks. In reality, *chaorder* [‘chaotic order’] is the principle of organisation: diasporic groups are characterised by multiple discourses, internal dissent, and competition for members between numerous sectarian, gendered or political groups, all identifying themselves with the same diaspora (Werbner 2002, 123). The differences here are not just limited to Hindu, Muslim or Christian immigrants from India but can be seen from the different Telugu associations all over the world (TANA, ATA & ETA among others).

The most prominent features atleast in USA, UK, Canada, Australia of the Indian diaspora are Yoga, Indian cuisine and the Bollywood film industry. While popularity of the Yoga can be traced to the visit of Swami Vivekananda to the west but more research data is needed to understand as to when actually Indian Cuisine and Bollywood began and became popular in the west. “Bollywood constitutes the most prolific film industry in the world” (Aftab 2002, 88). Like the diaspora, Bollywood is a “complex symbiosis between globalism and nationalism” (Dissanayake 2006, 26) and is increasingly ubiquitous (Aftab 2002, 88). Bollywood is receiving heightened international attention primarily due to the over 20 million strong diaspora which enthusiastically supports the industry.

It is not just the Bollywood but films like **Gandhi** made by Hollywood have enhanced the India’s brand significantly and interpreted positively the Indian ways of life all over the world. In addition one can also see that Vegetarianism, Indian food, Yoga, Indians travelling abroad for business and Indian investments or mergers or acquisitions by the Indian companies and love for higher studies among Indians are other features which caught the attention of the world. Among these the contribution of the telugus particularly in medicine, pharmaceuticals, IT and bio technology among many others are noteworthy.

Hence, the Indian diaspora was proven to be both a mental and physical state. That it has been written into the Indian government’s policies, is a form of economic investment, heavily associated with the Bollywood film industry as well as being a means of social and political organisation. Conversely to some, the Indian diaspora is no more than a mental state, a feeling of ‘Indianness’ and of being conscious of their ethnic distinctiveness.

The point is that inspite of our achievements not just academically but also through our tremendous contributions in peace & non violence why that Indians (and many of them Telugus) are at the receiving end in USA, UK, Australia as reflected in murders and other forms of violence? Why at all we are being singled out among immigrants? Or is it our inability understand the cultural differences or security requirements. Our problems in this context remind the world the kind of problems faced by the Jews in USA & Europe in the beginning of the 20th Century. In view of these I felt it would be useful to share the following popular online article about the key challenges the Indians face abroad and certain perceptions about us by the foreigners. Having a look at these and discussing it in detail I feel we can plan or guide better our aspirants to cope more effectively with the cross cultural differences and manage the issues.

1. NRIs and India diaspora – the key challenges abroad!

Leaving India and going abroad -USA, Canada, England....-is a very big step, a life changing experience in the true sense of the words. To search for a better future, we often leave behind everything- the friends, the family members, the social circle and the personal identity in most cases. It is a very common perception, – and true to an extent – that going abroad will improve our life and the lives of those who depend on us. It is always made to sound all too easy to settle and prosper in Western countries as an NRI. The overseas life is always portrayed to be full of luxury and without hardships. The big mansions and large farming lands in any neighborhood of India are invariably linked to those who have gone abroad. But, this is far from the real truth. There is no doubt that many of these countries are considered the land of opportunities with a lot of promise. The amenities of daily life and conveniences of a developed society combined with buying power of the dollar offer a lot of lure and attraction. However, the reality is far different and a newcomer from India is hit with the real truth about life soon after departing the plane. What was taken for granted till yesterday – the language, the education and common social behavior – is all up for recalibration in the new land. The facts are that the challenges overseas are very real and hurdles to succeed are much higher for a foreigner. It is not one or two isolated issues but a combination of many such problems that create the real experience abroad, an experience quite different than anyone expects. Here are the key challenges that a newcomer encounters overseas:

Language Barrier

Yes, we speak English in India too; actually most of the education is in English now-a-days. However, it is not the language itself but the way it is spoken. It is not wrong or right way, but a different way. The slang, the pronunciation, the body language for subtle differences of meanings.....; combine all that with the **Indian accent**, and you have the language barrier. To be successful in a new society, effective communications is a must, as we all soon learn. The language barrier requires new adjustments and it takes time to improve the communication skills.

Cultural Shock

Everything is very different all of a sudden for a new person. The language, the market places, the scene on the street– it is all a bit too much to adjust to overnight. It has nothing to do with being open-minded, fast learner or quick to adapt. It is just like being parachuted into a place far away and far different and you don't know where to go once you touch the ground and remove the parachute. The race relations in America are very dynamic and much different from multi-cultural Indian society.

Family and Peer Pressure

This may be self inflicted pressure in many of the cases, but it is there. We want to be successful and most of us end up being successful, may be in a very different way than we first thought of. However, for a newcomer, the expectations are generally quite high. Based on the stories told back home, -the common perception about living in West – there is this expectation that opportunities would be in abundance and easy to find. Not really.

Ego and Pride Adjustment

As the days go by and there is no luck in finding the kind of career opportunities once dreamed of, the pressure starts to build. The weight of all this combined with the realities of daily

hurdles can play a big drag on anyone's psyche. That is when many questions get raised: was it the best decision to go abroad? Is it all really worth it? What am I doing wrong? ...The bright lights of the future that once shined so strong, is not-so-bright in reality.

Education

This may not be an issue, it is just one more thing to question. Is it my education or lack of it that is pulling me back? Do I need a local degree or diploma to succeed? Once again, it is the combination of all negatives that affects the self-confidence.

A Dollar is a Dollar

In India, a dollar earns high value and respect because of the currency exchange rate. A few hundred dollars are many thousands in rupees. When we live in US and work in US, we earn in US dollars and spend in US dollar. And here in US, a few hundred dollars are just that – a few hundred of dollars!

Overseas perceptions (10) about people from India

So, what kinds of perceptions and preconceived notions they have about people from India in other countries?

Here are some of the overseas perceptions about Indians

1. Quiet, introvert, reserved: The people from India are considered to be reserved and a little shy; they are perceived to be a bit isolated from other communities, minding their own business. This perception is true to some extent, especially for the first generation of immigrants who tend to focus on their own lives and their own occupations. Many times, their socializing is limited to a circle of Indian friends and families, or acquaintances from Temples/Gurudwara gatherings etc. The tendency to isolate from Western or American society is not uncommon. This may be the fear of 'unknowns' in some cases, and the human nature of 'birds of a flock..' in others.

2. Hardworking: The perception that Indians are hard-working is true in most cases. An immigrant generally tend to work much harder to succeed in a foreign land, especially for the first generation folks who have language barrier and are new to the American culture. They have to deal with so many new challenges and hard work is the way around.

3. Frugal: Not sure how true this one is, this may a generational thing again, but Indians are assumed to be frugal. However, the older generation of Westerns is also frugal when it comes to spending. This could be due to their personal experiences of economic ups and downs. The Indians are often known for searching for best deals, and they always tend to drive a hard bargain.

4. Good work ethics: People from India are generally considered to have good work ethics (wonder why it is not evident in our own country). They work hard and follow the rules. At least that is what the common perception is at work places and among the American society.

5. Well educated: The Indians are perceived to have good education. This probably boils down to the fact that so many Indians are in highly skilled trades now-a-days. Also, the Indian parents tend to stress much more on education and its importance in life. This perception may also be due to the fact that overseas' technical and medical fields are full of Indians.

6. Not the leadership type: This is a common thinking at many work-places abroad, though nobody will say this to your face. While there are lots of Indians in higher management positions at bigger companies, the perception exists. The notion of being reserved and ‘minding their won business’ does play a role into this.

7. Vegetarian: Gandhi, the most famous Indian known abroad, was vegetarian; many Indian restaurants have vegetarian section in the menu. The westerns often assume that vegetarian life-style is the mainstream and preferred way for Indians.

8. Teetotaler: Not sure where this one came from. To the contrary, the Indian parties and weddings have more alcohol than any other parties abroad. Many of the English or American weddings have a bar for the drinks where you have to pay for the alcoholic drinks, unlike Indian parties with ‘open’ bar where alcohol is expected and served freely.

9. Techies: Indians are considered to be experts in technologies. This may be because many Indians are in the fields of computers and technical supports. Also, the perception about being well-educated plays into this.

10. Muslims: Totally false perception, as many Americans will point this out themselves. However, some Americans who are geographically challenged think that India is in the Middle-East somewhere. Indians have seen many more incidents of discrimination since the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

It is worth mentioning that modern American and the Western generation is much more in-tune with world affairs and diverse cultures. Most of the stereotypes related to cultures and racial biases are slowly –yes, very slowly unfortunately- fading with time. The younger American or Western generation is not as quick to judge others based on the ethnicity. This Seminar is important not just for the above but it is also a small step in the direction of understanding the correct political, social, cultural and economic implications of the Indian diasporas for the country. We need to note not just the students and aspiring professionals but **Indian tourism** is also undergoing tremendous change influencing Indian economy and employment. India like other developing nations has traditionally been just tourist receiving nation till 1995. But currently we are experiencing a significant surge in outbound tourism which is more than inbound tourism. Indian outbound travel market has grown from 3.7 million in 1997 to 9.8 million international departures in 2007 and over 10 million for 2008; the pace of growth has accelerated since 2004 at an average annual growth rate of over 16%. International tourism expenditure by Indians has grown from US\$ 1.3 billion in 1997 to US\$ 8.2 billion in 2007 to US 14 Billion in 2010. The UNWTO predicts that India will account for 50 million outbound tourists by 2020; the ‘Kuoni Travel Report India 2007’ predicts that total outbound spending will cross the US\$ 28 billion mark in 2020(www.iitmindia.com).

Another report by TOI (29.11.2012 page # 14) in *Indian Tourists flood foreign shores* states that *Indian travelers now want to see the world and explore exotic locales. They are loosening their purse strings to soak in varied experiences of life. Little wonder that foreign boards are busy promoting their countries as the new hot destination.*

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