

# North America



Indians in North America have emerged as the single largest as well as fastest growing component of the Indian Diaspora. Their achievements and status have earned them the respect of the other communities in North America. After all, the term “brain drain” was coined because of the migration of highly qualified professionals from India to the United States. Dr. Hargovind Khurana’s Nobel Prize for Medicine in 1968 and Dr. S. Chandrashekar’s Noble Prize for Astrophysics in 1983 are outstanding examples of their kind for a first generation of the Asian Diaspora.

- 12.2. The PIOs in North America can be broadly divided into 3 categories, which very roughly coincide with the chronology of their arrival in North America: (a) those from an agricultural background – the first wave which radiated southwards from British Columbia in Canada (b) entrepreneurs, store-owners, motel owners, self-employed small businessmen arriving mainly in the 1960s and onwards and (c) professionals, e.g., doctors, engineers (60s and onwards), software engineers, management consultants, financial experts, media people, (80s and onwards) etc. No first generation immigrants have excelled at the top of their professional ladder as this last category. The large and high-profile presence of Indo-Americans in the Information Technology and the Health sectors, the number of CEOs of Indian origin of the multinationals United Airlines (Rono Dutta), Sun Microsystems (Vinod Khosla), and Mc Kinsey (Rajat Gupta), and their increasing presence in the high-flying world of international finance and management consultancy has created a new image of the Indo-American community who are viewed with a new found respect in the United States.
- 12.3. People of Indian origin arriving from various former British colonies in Africa and the Caribbean and Fiji constituted the major portion of the second category, although the number of Indo-Fijians who fled Fiji accelerated in the aftermath of the 1987 military coup. There may be around 300,000 Indo-Caribbeans and Fijians of Indian origin in the US. Canada also has a substantial population of Indo-Caribbeans and Indo-Fijians.
- 12.4. The last decade has thus witnessed 3 critical trends with important implications for the leverage the community can exercise in the US context - a sharp increase in their numbers, the emergence of a large number of financially powerful and politically well-connected Indo-Americans, and an increase in their activities to promote some issues of concern to India in the US political arena. Kargil demonstrated their willingness to mobilise politically and contribute financially to Indian

causes. Similar sentiments of concern for their land of origin were displayed during the recent Orissa cyclone and the Gujarat earthquake.

- 12.5. The achievements of PIOs and NRIs in North America are not confined to the United States. Indo-Canadians have also come to be highly respected for their professional skills in medicine, academia and engineering. They have made noteworthy achievements in public life. Ujjal Dosanjh's election as Premier of British Columbia was a landmark not only for Indo-Canadians but also for the North American Asian Diaspora. There is probably no other example of a first generation Asian immigrant reaching such an elevated political position in a developed country. Herb Dhaliwal's inclusion as a Cabinet Minister in the Liberal Government represented another milestone. A number of Indians have been elected to the Canadian House of Commons and an Indian woman has been appointed to the Senate. Interestingly Indo-Americans in the US took much longer to achieve similar distinction in spite of the fact that Dilip Singh Saund from California was the first Indian and also the first Asian to be elected to the US Congress in 1956. The Indian representation in the UK has still not reached Cabinet level.
- 12.6. Recent developments following the tragic September 11 terrorist attacks on the WTC, have highlighted the vulnerability of the community and underlined the need both for political mobilisation to protect the community's interests, as well as for closer links with India.
- 12.7. The Indian community in North America, particularly the United States clearly constitutes a formidable new asset in strengthening India's relationship with the world's only superpower and also with Canada, a G-8 country with considerable influence in international affairs. This depends greatly on the quality of their interaction with the country of their origin and the sensitivity to their concerns displayed in India. In order to better understand this influential component of the Indian Diaspora, it would be useful to view the Indian migration and evolution of the Indian community in North America in a historical perspective.

## History

- 12.8. The impressive achievements of the highly visible, professional segment of the Indian community in the United States have blurred memories of the difficulties and prejudices faced by earlier generations of Indian immigrants. The latter were coloured (metaphorically) by colonial-era perceptions of Indian immigrants as 'coolies' – unskilled, indentured labour imported into British Caribbean and African plantations - after the formal abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1834 created a huge appetite for other, barely disguised forms of bonded labour. Attacks in 1987 on Indian women in New Jersey (the "dot-busters") and the more recent though isolated attacks on South Asians, primarily of the Sikh community in the aftermath of the World Trade Centre bombing - may have rekindled these memories, even though the contexts in these cases is entirely different from earlier instances of violence directed at them.
- 12.9. American perceptions of India before the First World War were inevitably filtered through a British prism, which accounted for the initial lack of empathy with India and Indian issues.

Indology was in its infancy, leaving the field open for patronising interpretations which derided India's heritage. An exception was the revulsion generated by the horrendous famines caused by the East India Company's plunder in Bengal province, which coincided with the American struggle for Independence. There was minimal contact between India and North America, with only some direct trade and limited American consular representation in Bombay and Calcutta.

- 12.10. Indian soldiers, who transited Canada on their return from Edward VII's coronation in 1902, first alerted their compatriots about the opportunities for settlement in the New World. Migration of Indians to North America began in mid-1903 when Sikh male immigrants settled in Vancouver, British Columbia to work in lumbering, agriculture and the railroads. An alternative source of cheap labour was in demand following imposition of a \$500 head tax on Chinese immigrants. However because of their colour, they were unwelcome and led hard lives, the Government making it difficult for them to bring their families. However, as living conditions worsened between 1849 and 1911 in the Punjab, their numbers continued to swell, peaking at 2623 in 1908.
- 12.11. To limit the influx the Canadian government in 1908 prohibited immigrants who had not travelled to Canada by continuous journey from their country of citizenship, and the Canadian Pacific Company, the only company providing such services, was ordered not to sell through tickets to Indians. Other conditions included fluency in a European language, which the Indian community however successfully contested, and the requirement that each immigrant bring at least \$200 with him. Indian immigration thus slowed to a trickle to only 878 between 1909 and 1943. Increasing numbers returned to India or went to the United States, which had not yet passed discriminatory legislation.
- 12.12. Despite the harsh conditions, Canadian Sikhs established a cohesive community bound by religious and cultural ties. Gurudwaras were constructed and became the focal point for boosting morale and community activities. The Sikh community contributed to charitable causes in India and more important, united to fight discriminatory laws against Indians. Their success in contesting discriminatory anti-immigration legislation alarmed the Canadian Government (thus the 1952 incarnation of the Immigration Act retained provisions prohibiting immigrants of "unsuitable" races and occupations and was the principal instrument for implementing a white Canada policy till the late 60s). A Canadian Court ruling in 1913 reversing the deportation of 39 Indian immigrants proved to be the last straw. In January 1914 new Orders-in-Council completely debarring Indians from entering Canada were effected by the Canadian Government.
- 12.13. The *Komagata Maru* incident of 1914 brought into sharp focus the fortitude of Indian immigrants, the blatantly discriminatory attitude of the Canadian authorities and the extent to which they were prepared to contravene their own laws to prevent Indian immigration. In 1914, one courageous Indian, Gurdit Singh, angered by the inhuman treatment of Indian "coolies" he encountered in Malaysia, decided to challenge the ever tightening restrictions on immigration including the 'continuous journey' law. He chartered a Japanese ship the *Komagata Maru* to carry 376 prospective immigrants from Calcutta to Vancouver. The ship was however surrounded by

the Canadian navy on arrival and denied permission to dock. It was forced to wait for 2 months in Vancouver harbour. The passengers were not allowed to disembark nor provided with food and water. The Sikh community organised food and legal assistance, and even offered to stand security for the passengers, to no avail. The Canadian navy eventually escorted the ship outside Canadian waters. Upon reaching Budge Budge near Calcutta, the exhausted passengers were fired upon by the British and several of them died.

- 12.14. Since Canada was one of the major routes chosen by Indian immigrants, this affected immigration into the US also. Nevertheless some Indians, largely from the Sikh community, managed to reach the West Coast of the United States from Canada. Immigration of only 6359 “East Indians” between 1905-1915 was enough to ignite existing anti-Asian hatreds, already inflamed by the presence of Chinese and Japanese labourers. In 1907 anti-”Hindu” riots broke out in Bellingham, a small town in Washington State south of the Canadian border, followed by similar occurrences in other towns. These instances of violence against Asian immigrants were almost never punished and were tacitly supported by the press. Immigrants thereafter drifted to California, where through its industry and thrift the small Indian community was able to repatriate considerable savings to its homeland. Like its compatriots in Canada, its members led hard lives and suffered racial discrimination. Several married women of Mexican origin, though these unions ended frequently in divorce.
- 12.15. In 1917, the US Congress also created the notorious “barred zone” through an immigration act that also mandated a literacy test, which effectively shut out unskilled Asian immigration. The small Indian community inevitably got politicised under such conditions. Lala Lajpat Rai established the Indian Home Rule League of America between 1914-1919, and mobilised opinion in favour of the Indian nationalist movement. The most well known attempt at radical political mobilisation was the short-lived *Gadar* party under Lala Har Dayal, who had immigrated to the United States in 1911. The *Gadar* Party, based in San Francisco, enjoyed support from the mainly Sikh communities in the United States and Canada, and planned an uprising in the Punjab aimed at overthrowing the Raj in February 1915. Members of this heroic but ill-fated enterprise forged links with Irish activists and even German diplomats. Relentless British infiltration and surveillance and collaboration with the US led to its activities being pre-empted and activists apprehended, jailed and convicted for violating American Neutrality Laws.
- 12.16. The next hurdle the Indian community had to cross was the decision of the US Government to revoke naturalisation papers of Indians on the basis of the US Supreme Court’s rulings in the early 20s to restrict naturalisation to *white* Caucasians only, after an Indian Sikh Bhagat Singh Thind, lost his case to be classified as a Caucasian, or a white. Indians were thus denied citizenship and by extension, the right to own land (the California Alien Land Laws prohibited aliens ineligible for citizenship from owning or leasing agricultural land.). This decision was successfully challenged in 1926 by another Indian - Sakhram Ganesh Pandit - who established that his 1914 naturalisation, endorsed by a regular court, could not be reopened beyond the 3 year-period provided for appeal.

- 12.17. Meanwhile economic interest, shared anti-colonial sentiment, slowly increasing inter-action and a gathering realisation of the wisdom embodied in Indian culture helped to create a more favourable atmosphere for the consideration of Indian issues. US consular officials, missionaries and artists who had visited India since the 19th century published several accounts of their impressions, the most prominent being Mark Twain who published a sympathetic and lively account of his visit in *Following the Equator, A Journey Around the World* in 1897. There was an animated exchange of views and cooperation between American Unitarians and Rammohun Roy and his Brahma Samaj.
- 12.18. The great American intellectuals Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau were influenced by Hindu philosophical literature. Mme Blavatsky expounded an amalgam of Hindu and Buddhist beliefs in New York following her visit to Tibet in 1873. Swami Vivekananda's visit to the US on the occasion of the World Parliament of Religions in 1893 in Chicago, culminated in the rise of Vedanta societies all over the US. Another Indian saint, Yogananda devoted his life to promoting mutual East-West understanding, whose *Autobiography of a Yogi* became an American bestseller. Visits by eminent personalities like Swami Vivekananda and Rabindranath Tagore in 1916, were landmarks in stimulating popular American interest in Indian philosophy. The American Oriental Society, initially founded in Boston in 1842, established by John Pickering and William Jenks, catalysed interest in Indian philosophy and languages, which spread to academia. Ananda K. Coomoraswamy's dedication to Indian art, though himself half-Sinhalese and half-British, helped to create the first Indian art collections in the US.
- 12.19. Mahatma Gandhi, who freely acknowledged his intellectual and spiritual debt to the American philosopher Henry David Thoreau, in his turn exercised a powerful hold on the American imagination and influenced Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. His American supporters - distinguished and highly influential personalities like William Randolph Hearst, John Gunther and his wife, and Louis Fischer - espoused the India's Independence cause. *Time* magazine chose Gandhi as Man of the Year in 1930/1. It is common knowledge that US President F.D. Roosevelt strongly differed with Winston Churchill on the issue of Indian Independence.
- 12.20. By the end of the Second World War, American perspectives on India had therefore undergone a perceptible change. Also, the US needed more professionals, particularly doctors, engineers and entrepreneurs, and this was the prime motivation for moves to ease immigration restrictions. Efforts of the Indian lobby in America and particularly of the New York-based Indian merchant, J.J. Singh, and US Congress members Emmanuel Celler and Clare Booth Luce culminated in the bipartisan Indian Citizenship Bill of 1946, permitting naturalisation for Indian immigrants and giving India a token annual quota of 100 immigrants. Between 1948 and 1965 however only 7000 "East Indians" had been recorded as entering the US. By this time the first wave of Indians who had arrived in California in the late 19<sup>th</sup>- early 20<sup>th</sup> century had acquired relative prosperity.
- 12.21. In addition, several people of Indian origin in the Caribbean and Africa and Indo-Fijians headed for North America in a steady stream. The Indian community in general had been haunted by feelings of insecurity as independence for the British colonies approached and questions of their

citizenship and relationship with indigenous communities came into sharper focus. The pace accelerated after Idi Amin's forcible eviction of Asians in the 70s and the 1987 coup by Rabuka ousting the elected government of Fiji that had the overwhelming support of the Indian community. Indo-Fijians for example belonging mostly to the semi-skilled labour category, though some held professional qualifications, headed for Vancouver, which now has the largest population of Indo-Fijians outside Fiji.

- 12.22. Indians from East Africa added a new element in the Indian community profile in the United States – that of the small, self-employed entrepreneur. They moved into the newspaper kiosk, grocery store, laundry and motel business. They now constitute the single largest ethnic group owning the motel industry in the United States, especially on the Western Coast. Possessing characteristic Indian virtues of thrift, family values and hard work, they started with family-owned motels at the lower end of the market, and moved up to own the more up-scale *Days' Inn* and *Holiday Inn* franchises. Many *Dunkin Donuts* franchises are owned by Gujaratis from East Africa, as no clash with dietary restrictions is entailed, unlike at *Mc Donald's*.
- 12.23. The Immigration Act of 1965 abolished immigration quotas and led to an ever-increasing flow of Asians and Indians to the United States, irrevocably changing the racial composition of immigrants in favour of the Asian communities. This led to an increase in immigration by Indian professionals - doctors and engineers, whose progeny are now a major presence in America's top Universities. Some Indians were able to pursue higher studies in the United States itself in engineering and medicine following the easing of visa regulations in the 60s and 70s.
- 12.24. In Canada, the continuous journey legislation was dropped after the Second World War. In 1947 Indians won the right to vote. Between 1962 and 1967, around the same time as the US, Canada abolished discrimination in immigration policy based on race and nationality, and in 1971 somewhat self-consciously proclaimed 'multiculturalism' as a national policy. This led to a ten-fold increase in Indian immigration from 6774 in 1961 to 68,000 in 1971. Whereas the majority of earlier immigrants had been from the Sikh community, from 1962 onwards people from other Indian communities, religions and regions as well as from other parts of the world started to stream in. Thus by 1991, only 173,670 out of over 500,000 immigrants of Indian origin were born in India. PIOs from the Caribbean, Fiji and Africa also settled in Canada. The cultural diversity of the Indian community reflected the cultural diversity of India. A significant change in Canadian policy has been the signing of the Extradition Treaty with India in 1987 and addition of *terrorism* as grounds for exclusion under the Immigration Act, 1993.

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