Indian Diaspora in North America: Issues of Education, Migration & Identity

In the last two centuries, people from India have moved to almost every country in the world forming the second largest diaspora from Asia, next only to China. Migration of people across the globe is an inseparable part of human history but massive movements from India took place in the 19th & 20th centuries. In steer numbers, Indians constitute the third largest group living in other countries next only to the British and Chinese; there are over 11 millions people of Indian origin living in 70 countries round the world. They constitute more than 40% of the population living in Fiji, Mauritius, Guyana and Surinam. There are smaller but sizeable minorities in other countries like South Africa, Sri Lanka, U.K. and Canada. The three broad patterns of migration in terms of history and political economy are as follows:

1. Emigration that began in 1830s to British, French and Dutch colonies as indentured labor
2. Emigration to industrial developed countries during the post World War II period;
3. More recent emigration to West Asia basically as labor and other service occupation on contract basis.

We are concerned with the emigration to industrially developed countries and particularly N.America. Here, too different phases can be seen with 1965 being the dividing line between them. In 1965 the discriminatory provision in the immigration laws of USA were dismantled. Canada followed suit in 1967. It led to a steep rise of emigration from Asia, the Caribbean Basin and South America. In 1965 there were 20,683 Asian immigrants amounting to about 5% of the total immigrants that year. By the late 1970s, Asian immigration increased over sixfold and claimed about 40% of the newcomers. China, Philippines, India and Vietnam were the leading nations sending people to USA. After the 1965 Act, the applications for admissions grew especially in the occupational category. This happened even before the 1965 Act became fully operational by 1968. Under the old system, scientists from Europe and Great Britain could emigrate almost at will. Now they were on first come first served basis in the professional’s category. Thus by the 1965 Act, Europeans lost the advantage and now had to wait their turn.

The 1965 amendments emphasized family unification and because the Asian Americans were less than 1% of the American total in 1960 it was felt they would not have the necessary kinship for any substantial increase in numbers. However, David M. Reimer presents a picture familiar to us in India. In US Education provided an important migration tool. An Asian student went to US as a non-immigrant to complete his education. While completing his studies he found a job, got the labor Department Certification and became an immigrant. Once he acquired that status, he used the family preference clauses to bring over his spouses and children. A few years later, all became citizens eligible to sponsor their brothers and sisters or parents. The brothers and sisters in turn brought their families and the immigrant kinship network expanded. In Canada broadly similar provisions enacted in 1967 led to a greater expansion of family class immigrants rather than independent professionals. Many also came as nominated relatives who were midway between independent professionals and dependent relatives. They were subject to assessment for long-term selection but were to be given short-term assistance by their sponsors. However in Canada the family reunion cases accounted for most of the increase. One reason could be that the migration in the pre 1967 phase to Canada had been mainly in the areas of farming, sawmills and forestry.

Education is perhaps the most potent tool in the shaping of a human being as it moulds the body, heart, mind and intellect. It penetrates all aspects of his psyche and shapes his personality thereby becoming a strong motivating force in his actions, second only to the emotional commitment to the family. One can react against one’s alma mater, be indifferent to it or be intensely loyal wanting to establish a lifelong relationship with it depending on what one perceives to have received from it. The friendships and associations formed during this period can be the strongest as they are not based on any self-interest and selfish motives. Education as a tool of migration and one of the most important factors of Indo-US relations can be looked at from three aspects

1. Indian universities producing skilled manpower all of which could not be absorbed in India for different reasons like lack of employment opportunities, or unsatisfactory working conditions or better prospects in America.
2. Indian students studying in America who went as non-immigrants but altered their status through
marriage or employment to stay on there.

3. American educational aid to Indian universities and other exchange programs that led to two things: one areas of excellence and research were created in India; second, these institutions in turn provided skilled manpower to US leading to great debates on brain drain from India at the cost of the poor taxpayer’s money.

Why did so many Indian professionals make US their country of adoption? One important reason perhaps is that US became one of the most important countries for higher education replacing Great Britain at least for Indians. Education for the Indian middle class was through English and therefore language, which could have been a major hurdle, proved no barrier. Thousands of Asians studied in the US after 1960. Before the 1965 amendments, about 50,000 foreign students attended American universities. By 1981 the figure had reached approximately 300,000, Asians accounting for nearly half of the total. Many, as has been pointed out earlier stayed on and adjusted their resident status. In 1978, ten years after the 1965 Act came into full force, over 1800 non-immigrant students became immigrants, of which two-thirds were Asians. A survey of National Science Foundation (NSF) of scientists and engineers emigrating to US in the first five years, i.e. from 1966-1970, of the new immigration system, revealed that 60% had been in the US on a temporary basis some time before they had become immigrants and that a majority had actually lived there before they acquired a residential status. Ten years later the National Science Foundation reported that the number of foreigners earning Ph.D.s in engineering, physical sciences and mathematics had increased from the late 1960s. The Labor Department also reported that students who completed their education in US were more likely to stay and work there.

Among the Asians, Indians trailed Filipinos, Chinese and Koreans because few had emigrated before 1950 and not many possessed the kinship network to take advantage of the 1965 law immediately. However, India increased its immigration substantially in the ten years after 1965, the figure being over 115,000 in this ten years spans. In 1976, immigration from India passed 17,000 went over 18,000 in ’77 and over 22,000 in ’80. Gradually India was becoming one of the largest source nations for America. The first Indian immigrants after 1965 were predominantly males who took jobs in American urban hospitals, universities or businesses. Next to Filipinos and Koreans, Indians made up the largest contingent of East Asian medical professionals, including nurses and physicians.

Not all the Indian professionals were physicians. They also included scientists and engineers. In 1978, the NSF reported that Asia accounted for slightly more than half of the immigrant scientists and engineers of that year. India had the largest number of any nation and accounted for one third of the Asian total. Mostly these were engineers.

Those immigrants found that their westernized education in India, or sometimes in US did not necessarily lead to suitable employment. Like the doctor immigrants, they found conditions in US more attractive than at home. In any event, Indian migration was truly an elite group. In 1975 immigration authorities classified the vast majority of Indian immigrants as professional/technical workers or their immediate families, a higher rate than for any other nation. Of these Indians claiming an occupation, nearly three-quarters were professionals, technical and kindred workers or managers or administrators. As the elite settled and began to bring their families and as more Indians began to use family preferences, the social base of immigrants broadened the sex ratio of immigrants narrowed slightly and Indian communities developed, notably in New York City. One of the reasons, perhaps of why so many Indian professionals went to US and why so many students regarded it as their educational Mecca could also be the extraordinary and extensive collaboration between India and USA in spite of the fluctuating fortunes of political relationship between the two countries in the last fifty years. The American role in India’s development began in 1951 with a total assistance of $12,138 million through Sept. 1985. American assistance was used in various projects to increase India’s self-sufficiency. Co-operation in the fields of science and technology encompassed core areas like agriculture, fertilizer plants, forestry but also agriculture universities and raising of educational institutions. Many of India’s leading scientists today began work
as young researchers in Indo-US research projects. Over the years, 3000 American technicians, agronomists, engineers and doctors came to India to help with food and agriculture projects and 6000 Indians went to US for training.

Between 1952-72 American universities entered into partnership agreements with Indian institutions to establish agricultural universities. Involved were universities of Illinois, Kansas, Missouri, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Tennessee and the agriculture universities that emerged were situated in Punjab Haryana U.P. Orissa Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. During this period more than 300 American teachers gave over 700 teaching years worth of service and at least a thousand Indian faculty members and students trained in the States.

Between 1954-1966 universities of Illinois, Wisconsin and Michigan provided visiting professors and equipment to IIT Kharagpur, Colleges of Engineering in Pune and Guindy, the Bengal Engineering College in Howrah and the University College of Engineering in Roorkee. Through US Aid, regional engineering colleges were established and over the years, hundreds of educators went for training to US. However, one of the most significant contributions was the setting up of IIT Kanpur in 1962. Prof. Dahl who had enlisted the support of America’s top technical universities—MIT California Institute of Technology, Ohio State University, Princeton University, University of California at Berkeley, University of Michigan and Purdue University—led the first group of MIT professors to teach at Kanpur. By 1972 when the program formally ended, the consortium of universities had taught 2000 teaching years, fifty faculty members had received advanced training at US and the Institute had received laboratory equipment worth $8 million and Purdue University donated more than 40,000 books and journals.

Then there were programs of International Corps Research Institute for Semi Arid Tropics (ICRISAT) and work done by Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Fulbright programs, the American Studies Research Center and American Institute of Indian Studies. All created a huge educational pool of scholars, scientists and technicians in both countries who knew and understood each other. The underlying central belief was that over the longer term active contacts between professional elite of the two countries would be vital for the health of Indo _US friendship.

That vision can now be seen as coming to fruition to the benefit of both the countries. About 1.5 million people of Indian origin live in America. The median income of the Indian American family is $60,000 as compared to the national median income of about $39,000. Over 5000 Indian Americans serve as faculty in universities across America. Over 300,000 Indian Americans work in the information technology field with an average income of $200,000 a year. In the Silicon Valley the Indians live in the Bay area and work in the high tech. They are about 200,000 and have formed an incredible network. They invest in one another’s companies, sit on one another’s boards and hire each other in key jobs. Collectively they have created companies that account for $235 billion of market value. Indian engineers have gone to US since the early 1970s, a large number of them being from the six IITs . The rise of the IITians is a telling example of how global capitalism works today. The best companies draw on the best brains from around the world. By rising to the top of Corporate America, these IIT alumni lead all other Asians in their ability to reach the upper echelons of world class companies. Often whole batches from these institutions emigrate and are actively wooed by America to do so. The largest numbers of H1B visas are granted to Indian computer scientists.

The IIT graduates however, have not forgotten their alma mater, which has given them such good education. Thirteen CEOs who had all made their fortunes in Silicon Valley gathered in December to meet the Indian Prime Minister, to seek his blessings to raise $500 million dollars for the development of the IITs. They even offered under certain conditions to go up to $1 billion. Another group of Indian born, US based software engineers wants to raise an equal amount to set up a series of world-class centers of higher learning in India. Even individual expatriate Indians are donating to high tech causes. For example, Rekhi gave $5 million to IIT Mumbai in 1998 to establish a school of information technology to be named after him. Desh Deshmukh has pledged $100 million over the next twenty years to his alma mater, IIT Madras. In August 1999 N.R.Narayananmurthy head of the fund raising committee and chair of Infosys Technologies Ltd.of Bangalore raised $1 million during a single lunch meeting in San Francisco. He himself gave an individual contribution of $2 million to the school for a new computer laboratory. There are many more such examples. Indo-Americans have been making inroads in other fields also and sometimes in areas with which they
are not particularly identified as a community. This is especially true of the second generation by which I mean here the children born or raised in US of those immigrants who went in the 1960s and '70s. For example, Manoj Night Shyamalan, son of two immigrant physicians from India grew up in suburban Philadelphia in the 1980s. In 1997 Walt Disney Studios paid him $2.5million for the screenplay of the film The Sixth Sense and let him direct it as well. It grossed $100million.

Together with distinguishing themselves in all kinds of fields of science, technology, medicine, entrepreneurship, academics, computers, engineering, informatics, the Indian Americans are also gaining a political voice. They are seen as important fundraisers. They realize that it is not enough to just have money. Political voice is equally important. Many wealthy Indian Americans support political parties or candidates who are sympathetic to India. High tech entrepreneur Vish Akella initiated a $400,000 fundraiser for the Democratic Party and Sabeer Bhatia hosted a fundraiser for Gore that raised $600,000. An India Caucus has been formed for after India’s interest with American government and legislature. According to Dr. Kishan Aggarwal, chair of the legislative committee of Association of American Physicians of Indian Origin (APPI) this organization of Indian physicians has played a crucial role in Indo-American relationship. The AAPI members maintain a legislative office in Washington to keep track of bills that will affect them professionally and also those that affect America’s relationship with India. Once a year they organize “AAPI on the Hill” – a full day’s program where invited Congressmen discuss immigration, discrimination, and other issues concerning Indian Americans. More and more Indian Americans are like to get involved in the political process especially the second generation who will not be just fund raisers but participate more actively in the civic life and polity of the country as they are born and brought up in the US and regard themselves as primarily American.

However, even for them there are important issues of culture and identity. One of the pivotal issues pertaining to ethnic identity is articulated by Joanne Van Dijk in "Ethnic Persistence Among Dutch Canadian Catholics and Calvinists” Some of herpostulates are equally valid for Indian Americans. Ethnicity as she points out is a fluid concept, which changes over time and means different things to different generations. For the first generation, it means strong feelings about the country of their origin. For the second generation, ties with the homeland are gradually replaced by ties with their country. Yet not quite. Cultural differences remain and they have to be bridged. In USA whole literature is growing around second generation South Asians and more specifically Indian Americans. Joanne Van Dijk also makes an important distinction between immigrant culture and ethnic identity but does not elaborate upon it. Rasesh Thakar indirectly elaborates upon it in “Transfer of Culture through Arts—the South Asian Experience in North America.”

The underlying hypothesis in Rasesh Thakar’s article is that a group of immigrants from a particular country are not a monolithic block and therefore what takes place is not a retention or preservation of the culture of the home country but a transfer. Transfer can take place in several different ways among several different groups of people. For Thakar transfer includes not only movement from one generation another and also from on ‘sub-cultural group’ to another. For example, Indian Americans from Punjab or Bihar are not retaining Bharatnatyam in US in the way Indian Americans of South Indian origin are. Therefore, diversity in sub-cultural identities of different regions of India makes it more a case of transfer of culture than retention. Then, there is transfer or ‘propagation’ of culture from one ethnic group to other ethnic groups and in the process the transferring group is also ‘impacted’ by the culture of other ethnic groups giving rise to a new syncretic culture. Further, transfer also means from another time to our time, a process that is simultaneously taking place in India too. Rasesh Thakar points out that the two thousand year old traditions of classical dance are not just waiting in heir final form intact waiting to be transferred. In the home country itself they are being created or recreated, discovered being transferred from another time and in the process, grappling with issues of reform change adaptation and innovation. For example Bharatnatyam was systematized, reformed and re-established in the 1930s by Rukmani Devi Arundale who had herself been inspired by Anna Pavlova with whom she trained in ballet for a brief while. Examples of the east west encounter can be multiplied in the works of Uday Shankar, Ravi Shankar, Ram Gopal Vishwa Mohan Bhatt and others. ‘Tradition’ and ‘Modernity’ themselves are fluid terms. Traditions are revived, created and modernized and, often, modernity means a cutting away of the overlay of time and going back to the pristine purity of the original roots for to the Richas of the Rg Veda. All these influence immigrant cultural activity and what emerges is an immigrant culture as
distinct from ethnic identity.

As Evelyn Nodwell points out, dance serves a very important function in the Indian immigrant community. Parents find it the easiest and the most acceptable way of exposing the second generation to its heritage, ‘learning’ about India and being Indian, a means of social interaction, a binding force between family members sharing in Indian cultural activities who may otherwise have several issues of disagreement. Also, dance becomes a means of acquiring status in the community, of communicating with outsiders, and of defining and constructing Indian culture. It is a medium through which identity is represented, interpreted, transformed and lived. It becomes a link between the older and the younger generations and between Indians and others.

Social organization of an immigrant community, its institutionalization, its completeness or the lack of it is an important factor in ethnic identity retention. According to Breton, the greater the institutional completeness the greater the integration in the ethnic community and the level of ethnic persistence in which ethnic culture can be practiced in public situations and it is public practice that is essential for ethnic culture to survive. According to Herberg, formal organizations provide the means by which ethnic culture can be practiced in public situations and it is public practice that is essential for ethnic culture to survive. It particularly helps in the socialization of younger generations. Its representation changes over time and what emerges in the second and third generations appears amore syncretic culture borrowing and giving freely for other cultures while retaining some essential elements of the initial culture.

The retention/transference of culture is also linked to factors relating to religious affiliations, economic status, language retention and others. O'Bryan, Reitz and Kulipowoka have found that among the Dutch, the highest rates of church attendance is in the first generation. It declines only slightly in the second and third generations. This may seem surprising to begin with but an emotion need has driven Indian Americans, too, to build over 400 temples in USA. This coupled with the internet is leading to hyperlink Hinduism. The second generation’s need to understand their spiritual and religious roots manifests in the popularity of comparative religion courses in American universities. The temples act not only as religious places but also as social and cultural centres running language classes, promoting cultural activities, youth camps, community services and other such activities.

In the case of language it is found that while levels of ethnic language use are moderate or strong in the first generation but declines sharply in each succeeding generation. But there is a desire to learn the language which can again be seen by the number of Indian American students joining Indian language programs. The first generation found ethnicity to be an important criterion in the use of services like doctors, insurance agents and services like laundry, cleaning and others. So much so that an economy within an economy grows. Endogamy was important to the first generation and less so to the second generation.

All this shows that within the same ethnic group acculturation is leading to a difference between the first and second generation, where the second generation is combining both its heritage and the cultural influences in the country of adoption and creating a syncretic culture. At this point, it might be useful to look at dhoolakia Sarhadi’s point about acculturation. He sees acculturation as the transference of cultural elements from a dominant culture to a minority culture and in this he differs from Thoae, according to whom: “migrant population would start identical with its original culture and move through intermediate degrees, closer and closer to the new culture.” This definition, however, as Sarhadi points out, is limited because it then essentially sees the cultural exchange between parents and children as one of confrontation. The second generation, however, socializes in a space occupied by both the parental and mainstream cultures simultaneously. As one young man stated in Sarhad’s study: “I think it’s easier for our parents to be able to take what they wnt from the west but still keep their roots and leave out what they don’t want. But when you are raised here, this is (all) we’ve been exposed to from day one.” It is not, therefore, simply a question of becoming more like one’s American peers in school and less like one’s [arents. It is to juggle commitments to both and define oneself simultaneously as South Asian and American. Therefor, the young create culture in a new context. As another person said in Sarhadi’s study, “I want to rediscover my heritage. I have romantic notions of being Indian and being an immigrant and what I do here (at University) is reconstruction.”
According to Stuart Hall, "Identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by and position ourselves within the narrative of the past." This is borne out in Sarhadi’s study by another voice: "I know the tradition that comes with it (being South Asian), I am not accepting all of them, but the ones I am, I will partake in." It confirms with Hal’s sense of identity which "is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as ‘being’ far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past. They are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power.” Hence the South Asian youths are redefining what it means to be a South Asian and not rejecting their heritage. Where this is accepted by the first generation the parents are not repressive but active players in the socialization of the child while undergoing change themselves. The question then arises whether the country of origin i.e. India, also needs to put into place some programs to retain the loyalty of the second generation. In India this loyalty has been presumed and encouraged mainly in the form of incentives for NRI investment whether direct or as deposits. No mercenary relationship lasts and is at best cynical. The battle has to be for emotional involvement for that is what at the bottom loyalty, nationalism and even effective citizenship are all about. Further if the concerns of the vast and varied Indian diaspora have necessarily to infringe upon and influence key areas in India like foreign policy and investment then India must necessarily put into place a clearly defined policy together with an effective implementational machinery that ensures her national interest and concerns are articulated by this diaspora.

India has probably not yet fully understood the pivotal role that educational institutions can play and the potency of culture in this area. The American example in India in itself provides a model. All American universities encourage a study abroad program for one semester which form a part of the degree program. They encourage students to take this as it broadens the perspective and deepens the understanding of the students. Indian universities have not looked at this opportunity with any degree of seriousness and little though has been given to what should be a national program. Again, language teaching exchange programs, cultural tourism, creation of opportunities to learn Indian dance and music in India and strengthening of what is undertaken in America, are just some of the things India can do to retain the emotional loyalty of the second generation which is actually searching for such opportunities.

The emotional factor plays an important role in the attitude of the first generation immigrants from India as they have a natural desire to remain in touch with their members of their family, childhood friends and alma-mater. They have the urge to do some thing for India and how far this translates into action differs from person to person. They have grown up with Indian cultural traditions. The professional and academics are particularly aware of the fact they were educated at minimal cost by the people of India. They often lead dual lives, Americans at workplace and Indians at home. The challenges to ensure that the next generation has a similar emotional attachment for the country of their ancestry. This challenge is not fully understood is because there is no clear cut demarcation between the first and second generation. While there is a huge second generation, continuous migration ensures a constant first generation. The attitudes currently witnessed in the second generation are complex. In school a number of Indian origin children try to underplay their Indian identity. However, in universities, a number of them find themselves wanting to know more about their heritage. Almost every university has Indian Students Associations mainly comprising of second generation persons of Indian origin. In fact in bigger universities, students coming from India and the second generation students of Indian origin active in separate organizations reflecting the culture of the first generation and more immigrant culture of the second generation. In many cases there is rivalry, dislike and misgivings about each other. So much so that it has given rise to acronyms like ABCDs and FOBCDs that have found their way into serious academic writing. The resource of the second generation can be used by India but special measures need to be taken to acquaint it with its heritage and develop in it the emotional attachment to its mother country.