

REVIEW ARTICLE
THAT ELUSIVE "OTHER INDIA"

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*The Other India: Overseas Indians
and their Relationship - Proceedings of a Seminar*
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India is traditionally perceived as an immobile country, and Indians as great "landlubbers" bound to their ancestral homes by inflexible strictures of caste and religion. Yet today, claims the Calcutta newspaper, *The Statesman*, Indians are ubiquitous. According to it, there are only five countries in the world - Cape Verde Islands, Guinea Bissau, North Korea, Mauritania and Romania - where Indians "have not yet chosen to stay".¹ It adds, however, that in fifty-seven of the one hundred and forty-three countries where they are found, their number is less than one thousand. There are, according to one estimate, some 10,541,589 people of Indian origin outside India. Of these, 6,789,206 are citizens of their countries of residence, while only 2,625,765 are Indian nationals.²

The creation of this dispersed, diffuse diaspora is one of the most important, and until recently, one of the least studied phenomena in modern history. The recent resurgence of interest in overseas Indian society and history especially since the 1970s, can perhaps be attributed to the opening up of the great debate over the nature of slavery in the United States, as well as to the deteriorating political position of Indians in a number of places in the world.³ In India, too, much interest has recently been shown in the condition of the overseas Indians. The book under review is an important expression of this. It is by no means unique, being the latest, and hopefully not the last, in a long series of polemical as well as scholarly works dealing with the vexatious question of the relation-

ship between India and the overseas Indians. The response of Indians in India to the predicament of their distant cousins abroad has a long and tortuous history. It may not therefore be out of place here to discuss it briefly to put the work under review in historical perspective.

The more enlightened and politically aware sections of the Indian public never approved of emigration, and were its vocal critics throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They had reasons enough to be outraged, for the circumstances surrounding the emigration of Indian labourers and their treatment in the colonies, were singularly unremarkable. Their concern was expressed in a number of isolated places,⁴ though its effect on the decision-making process regarding emigration, is difficult to gauge. After the turn of the century, with rising political consciousness in India, greater concern was shown for the plight of overseas Indians. Mahatma Gandhi's own relentless struggle against the racist regime in South Africa imparted a sense of urgency and immediacy. Concern over a number of other issues - degradation of Indian women, the frighteningly common occurrences of violence and suicide among the immigrants, laxity in the administration of justice - raised, by C.F. Andrews,⁵ J.W. Burton,⁶ and Florence E. Garham,⁷ among others coalesced to give greater momentum. The intense pressure, generated as a result of their agitation, could no longer be ignored or shelved by the Government of India. As one British official noted acutely:

. . . the political aspect of the question is such that no one, who has at heart the interests of British rule in India, can afford to neglect it. It is one of the most prominent subjects in Indian political life today; and its discussion arouses more bitterness, perhaps, than that of any other outstanding question.⁸

Consequently, and despite vociferous protest from the labour-starved colonies, the Government of India abolished the indenture system in 1916.

This early phase was, perhaps, the most critical, certainly politically the most intense, period of India-Overseas Indian relations. There was greater active participation by India in the debate over the question of the suffering of overseas Indians. The struggle on their behalf, not an isolated, specific event, but part of the larger movement to regain the honour, respect and independence of India itself.

In the two decades after 1920, with indenture out of the way, new issues came to the fore. The most important "cause" throughout the Empire was the fight for "Equality" with Europeans, an equality of rights and privileges for all citizens, irrespective of colour or creed. This, after all, was the ideal of the British Empire. The challenge proved futile though it reflected, as K.L. Gillion has remarked, "undeniably an affirmation of awakened self-respect and pride among Overseas Indians".⁹ They were still hampered by numerous restrictions and disabilities, but were now beginning to fight their own battle. In the case of Fiji, for example, the 1929 common roll agitation, although "inspired from abroad, particularly by Polak, . . . was not directed from abroad".¹⁰ Vishnu Deo, a Fiji-born Indian politician, was the main actor in the drama. The role of the Government of India and of prominent Indians was still crucial, as Hugh Tinker has shown.¹¹ In contrast to the earlier period, however, the battle was not waged in the streets, near the centres of pilgrimages or other public places, but rather in delegations and committees and around conference tables.

With the coming of independence to India, the Indian response to the problems of overseas Indians acquired a different character. This was not surprising. Jawaharlal Nehru told the Constituent Assembly in 1947 that "The odd thing is that this subject [Indians in the British Commonwealth] becomes more and more difficult to deal with."¹² It was indeed a complex question; Britain was no longer an adversary but an ally; South Africa, too, was along with India, a full member of the Commonwealth. Thus, subtle diplomacy rather than strident agitation had to be the

future strategy. But even then India's role was to be limited. On 8 March 1948, Nehru hinted in the Constituent Assembly that unless overseas Indians were Indian nationals, India's interest would be only cultural and humanitarian.¹³ He reiterated his position at some length later. On 2 September 1957, during the course of a debate on Foreign Affairs in the Lok Sabha, Nehru stated:

The way we look at the problem is this: where the country has to face difficulties, we advise our countrymen to put up with those difficulties. We cannot ask for special privileges. But, where any unfair treatment is given to our countrymen, then, of course, we protest. But even then we protest in a friendly way; we do not issue threats. We refuse to do that. That is not the way to deal with such matters.¹⁴

On 17 December 1957, he once again told the Lok Sabha that overseas Indians should "always give primary consideration to the interest of the people of those countries; they should never allow themselves to be placed in a position of exploiting the people of those countries; they should be friendly to the people of those countries, co-operate with them - and help them, while maintaining their dignity and self-respect".¹⁵ This was wise advice, couched in polite humanitarian terms. But the message was unmistakably clear: overseas Indians, (not Indian nationals), had a different destiny, a different future: they could not, as in the past, count on India's direct and automatic political support.

This was probably an inevitable conclusion, the result of a number of factors including the emergence of India as an independent nation with its own immense problems and preoccupations, the realization of the difference between the destiny of "Indians overseas" and "overseas Indians", and not least of all, the death or declining influence of those who had long fought for the cause of overseas Indians. Whatever the reasons, the gulf between Indians and overseas Indians increased. For many Indians growing up in the post-

independent era, overseas Indians receded into a hazy memory, becoming deculturalized descendants of those unhappy labourers who had emigrated to far away lands a long time ago. And for overseas Indians, especially in the ex-sugar colonies, India vanished further into the past, until it became a mythical land, used on occasions to validate certain cultural and religious practices.

In recent years there has been an attempt, more in India perhaps than in the colonies, to come to terms with this drift, this gradual loosening of ties between the motherland and its overseas progeny. There is a real concern that something tangible ought to be done. An expression of this feeling was the formulation recently of a project on overseas Indians under the direction of I.J. Bahadur Singh at the India International Centre. *The Other India* is the first in a series of publications intended by the Centre. It originated as a result of a seminar at which academics, politicians, men of public affairs, ambassadors and international luminaries participated. Papers, usually with a certain practical, action-oriented concern, were presented. As often happens in such cases, the papers are of uneven quality: some offer new insights and data but most are distillations of earlier researches and personal experiences. Several pertinent questions are not discussed, for example, the origin and structure of the overseas Indian community. This has no doubt contributed to a somewhat uncertain discussion of the composition of the "Other India".

The book is divided into four parts. The first consists of brief inaugural remarks by Smt Kamladevi Chattopadhyay, Dr Karan Singh and Atul Bihari Vajpayee; except for the thoughtful introduction by the editor, it contains nothing new and adds little to the overall contribution of the volume. The second part comprises the most significant portion of the book, and consists of a series of essays on the society and politics of Indian communities in Sri Lanka, Nepal, Fiji, Mauritius, East Africa, Tanzania, East and Central Africa, South Africa, Britain, the United States, and the Caribbeans. In addition to these individual studies, there are more general surveys of the changing

relationship between India and overseas Indians, the question of nationality, citizenship and colour in the British Commonwealth, problems of psychological and cultural adaptation of immigrants, and a general comparative discussion of overseas Chinese and overseas Indians. The third part is a resume of discussion at the seminar, and the final section records of some of its recommendations.

It would be out of place here to discuss all the papers individually, though some general comments are in order. Several subjects are discussed by a number of authors, though with differing emphasis. One of the problems that seems common to a number of overseas Indian communities is the considerable amount of difficulty they have encountered, frequently because of deliberate harassment from those in power. This is most marked in South Africa, as Bridgelal Pachai shows. In other parts of the world it is present in a more subtle form. Despite this, it is to their credit that overseas Indians have survived and done well for themselves. An indication of this is provided by Paul Persaud in his survey of Indians in the Caribbean. Ahmed Ali, too, shows that the Fiji Indians have done well in the face of innumerable difficulties. However, while success has served them well, it has also brought in its train problems of enormous magnitude and quite profound implications.

For the overseas Indians appear invariably to have acted without much concern for the welfare of other sections of the larger society, especially the indigenous people. From this followed deliberate social segregation, which was reinforced by feelings of cultural and social superiority on the part of the Indians. Chauvinism only partly explains the phenomenon of Indian aloofness. Lack of assimilation is not merely an "Indian problem" as the logical extension of the argument would seem to suggest. Others in society, especially those who created the system and set the parameters within which the Indians worked and lived, are perhaps equally, if not, more responsible for the current dilemma. Furthermore, as R.R. Ramchandani (p. 137) has perceptively remarked, the real crux of the matter lies in the "warped colonial pattern of economic development, in the

working of which, the Africans [indigenous peoples] had become insignificant". Such a mode of development was based on the premise of maximum output, and the overseas Indians, "the helots of Empire" were remunerated on the basis of their contribution to the plantation (and later cash) economy. The indigenous peoples, who for socio-cultural reasons found it difficult to come to terms with the demands of the modern world were left by the side or kept in splendid isolation, and in the case of Fiji, given institutional protection and guidance to progress at their own pace. Hence, the question of lack of integration should be seen in a wider historical perspective. At the same time, while acknowledging the various social problems, the economic achievements of the overseas Indians should be seen in a positive light, as contributing to the development of the countries of their residence, from which all segments of the population benefited.

Divisiveness, factionalism and political rivalry, too, seem endemic to the overseas Indians condition. This is not something new. Hugh Tinker writing about the 1920s remarked that,

. . . there was perpetual tendency to factionalism and defection. The political history of every overseas Indian community was a story of internal conflict - between the prosperous and the less well-off, between conservatives and modernists, between those looking to India as their source of strength and those wanting to take their place in the land of adoption, between achievists and quietists. Compared to the group solidarity of Jewish or Chinese communities, the overseas Indians were divided and often helpless.¹⁶

Ahmed Ali in his survey on the political status of the Fiji Indians added other causes of division, including religion and language. In Mauritius, too, the Indians seem to have divided themselves between Hindus and Muslims, while in the Caribbean, religious divisions have sometimes also been given political expression.

Such a state of affairs is a remarkable testimony to the evolution and diversification of a community which has grown from very humble beginnings. It provides, too, a very interesting commentary on the perception of some outsiders who view the Indian community as an ominous monolith, single-mindedly attempting to dominate others. Conflict and factionalism was probably inevitable in the growth of the overseas Indian community. In the case of Fiji at least, once the indentured labourers' contracts had expired and they had left the confines of the plantations, they ceased to be the concern of the government. No attempt was made to formulate a coherent and comprehensive policy of social development or to forge a genuinely multiracial society. Thus, the Fijians and Indians continued to live a compartmentalized existence. In time, the Indians began to compete among themselves and to look to the subcontinent for cultural sustenance and inspiration. The emerging and deepening divisions took their own course. However, it should be remarked that seen from a different perspective, division in the Indian community could perhaps be a blessing in disguise. It could provide the beginnings of social and political activity among other than purely racial lines, leading to the emergence of truly issue-oriented rather than race-bound politics.

Among other essays in section two, those by Balachandran on "India and the overseas Indians: An Uneasy Relationship", and by K.N. Ramchandran on "Overseas Chinese and Overseas Indians: A Comparative Study", deserve some attention. Balachandran's thoughtful survey shows the fluctuating concern of (the Government of) India towards overseas Indians, a fluctuation necessitated by considerations of political expediency. Today, he says, there is a lessening of interest in India in the welfare of overseas Indians. He explains the reasons for this in the following terms:

With the break up of the Empire and the consequent emergence of sovereign states, Indians overseas have realized that given the structural changes, India would not be able to do even as much as she did before. As a consequence, they have become *more* self-reliant. The stoppage of emigration towards the close of the imperial era, severed what was previously a continuous link with India. The countries which emerged from the Empire, cut away from Britain, began to develop their own individual personalities. Adapting themselves to emerging conditions around them, Indians in the former Colonies have developed distinct cultures. Offers for help have come only from first generation immigrants still having considerable cultural, social and economic ties with their country of origin. Others fight their own battle (p. 68).

In such circumstances, India can do little, politically. The only path open to it is to keep "the lamp of Indian culture . . . alight in far-flung parts of the globe", a proposition the implications and consequences of which are considered below.

K.N. Ramachandran provides a comparative perspective on overseas Indians and overseas Chinese. After noting certain similarities in the patterns of overseas migration of the Chinese and Indian, and their deep attachment of their mother-lands, he discusses the different approaches of the two nations towards their overseas progenies. India followed a passive and amorphous "policy" towards overseas Indians, urging them as Nehru did, to forge a separate destiny in harmony with the aspirations of the local population and local needs. China, on the other hand, pursued a vigorous overseas Chinese policy. This was motivated by political and, perhaps even more importantly, economic considerations, without sufficiently taking cognizance of the local political situation. This attitude might well have been related to the urgent situation in China which preceded a massive exodus

of nationals, and for the time being, precluded their return. Thus, the Common Programme of 1949 unequivocally declared that Peking would do "its utmost to protect the legitimate rights and interests of Chinese residing abroad" (p. 229). The overseas Chinese were allowed to elect deputies to the National People's Congress. This policy went through several vicissitudes and it is difficult to be optimistic about its achievements. Ramachandran wryly remarks that the future of overseas Chinese and overseas Indians will ultimately depend on "the goodwill and understanding of the indigenous rulers and their perceptions of the role of the immigrants in the development of their respective societies" (p. 231). He concludes that an honest search for lasting solutions both by the indigenous and immigrant populations is the answer.

Obviously, then, the question of the relationship between India and overseas Indians is a very complex one as relationships with motherlands are bound to be, and there are no clear-cut solutions. What should or can be done? In the last part of the book, various recommendations were made by the participants in the seminar. These ranged over a wide area - and many are of too general a nature to be given practical expression. The participants felt that a greater degree of rapport between India and overseas Indians was desirable; that overseas Indians who are foreign nationals should participate fully in the national life of the countries of their origin, while Indian nationals should be circumspect in their activities; that greater cultural interaction should be encouraged; and finally that wherever possible, economic collaboration between India and countries with Indian population, should be encouraged.

These statements are innocuous and by themselves do not constitute any new approach to an old problem. Yet, in the contemporary world, the problem has acquired a new character, deserves closer scrutiny, and demands a more developed response than the book proposes. A clearer understanding of the evolution and structure of the overseas Indian community is needed. It should be recognized that overseas Indians constitute a very heterogeneous community for a number

of reasons, including differences in patterns and conditions of migration and experience in the colonies, exposure to different sets of social, political and cultural influences at different points in time, and frequency and intensity of contact with India. It is necessary to distinguish between the descendants of pre-war involuntary migrants and largely post-war voluntary migrants. The former (with the possible exception of those in Southeast Asia) have lost contact with their motherland which survives in the memory only as a mythical land; for the latter, it is "home" to which frequent visits are made. Many recent migrants are Indian nationals - especially to the Gulf states - and they make a direct and very valuable contribution to the Indian economy. They constitute a sub-category of their own. Hence, a common set of policies cannot be applied to all overseas Indians. India has a direct responsibility for the welfare of its nationals, and can exercise legitimate control over the repatriation of wealth from foreign countries. In the case of Sri Lanka or Nepal, which have substantial numbers of Indian nationals deriving their livelihood there, the migrants can legitimately influence Indian foreign policy towards those countries. India's trade and strategic links with the two countries are substantial, and can easily act as a powerful lever. The suggestion, therefore, of enlarging the overseas Indian cell in the Ministry of External Affairs, possibly with the appointment of a senior official to deal with these matters, is a sensible one.

India can have no such "policy" towards those overseas Indians, descendants of indentured labourers, who live in the far-flung corners of the globe, mostly in the Third World. Politically, she can have little influence with them and economically her ties are insubstantial and tenuous. Moreover, India's direct interest and action could legitimately be construed as interference which would only serve to aggravate further the situation of the overseas Indians. The only possible course of action is to take up any problems which may arise (for example, as the expulsion of Indians from Uganda) in international forums like the United Nations. Even then such issues would need to be seen in broader humanitarian, rather than purely Indian terms to

attract general and effective support.

Many participants in the seminar felt that the strengthening of cultural ties between India and overseas Indians is the best course of action. This is wise, though, perhaps the cultural link - established through the export of Yoga, sitar, literature and philosophy - might be most fruitful in the cosmopolitan west. Those far-flung ex-sugar colonies have their own rich traditions and folklores to which Indians have been exposed for well over a century. Consequently, overseas Indian culture has absorbed quite a lot of the local flavour. Thus, from the available literature, it would seem that there is something specifically West Indian about Indian culture in the West Indies, in the same way as there is something distinctively Fijian about Indo-Fijian culture. Put another way, a West Indian would have more in common with his Negro counterpart than, say, with a Mauritian Indian, and vice-versa. This adaptation is not surprising; it was born out of necessity for survival and also because of infrequent contacts with the motherland - most overseas Indians in the sugar colonies have never been to India.

The setting up of Indian cultural missions in these countries will probably not achieve much. Overseas Indian culture has developed and diversified to such an extent that it cannot now be moulded too deeply by India-Indian culture. It has to be realized that overseas Indians will live and work in an essentially western-oriented environment and hence more attention will be paid to acquiring those traits and skills which will further their professional and social interests in the extremely competitive environment. For them, the setting up of an Indian cultural mission would be of little relevance and interest.

There are two further criticisms levelled against Indian cultural missions especially by the critical intelligentsia. One relates to the essentially elitist nature of such missions, which are invariably ensconced in cities and cater, unwittingly perhaps, to the tastes of the local elite. This is a valid criticism, and Dr S.D. Muni's

perception (p. 240) is certainly correct. The other criticism is a more serious one, directed against perceived Indian "cultural imperialism". The critics claim that those local art and music forms which do not measure up to traditional Indian forms, are seen as being inferior and in need of "Indianization". They argue, furthermore, that the local performers as a result become discouraged and that this in turn impedes the development of the local culture. In the long run, they assert, the process of nation-building will suffer if the attempts at "Indianization" are not checked. There is probably a grain of exaggeration in this essentially nationalist view, but the underlying attitude that culture is an ever-evolving process which must be responsive to the local environment, cannot be disputed.

Overseas Indian experience (in the sugar colonies at least) is a history of fragmentation and reconstitution. It was the fragmentation of Indian village life following British penetration, which pushed distressed peasants out of their ancestral homes to far away places in search of a better livelihood. On the voyages out and in the plantations, this process accelerated, though there never was a complete break down of social and cultural life among the immigrants. Simultaneously, the process of reconstitution, of building upon the fragments that survived the ordeal, took place. Naturally these people absorbed a lot from the prevailing environment and assimilated it with the remnants of their Indian culture. The result is still evolving and adapting. What emerged was a mixed culture, still Indian though no longer strictly traditional. Any attempt in India to formulate a "policy" towards these overseas Indians will have to come to terms with this basic truth. We may find in the end that the "Other India" does not, in fact, exist. Except possibly in our minds.

Notes:

- 1 A review of I.J. Bahadur Singh (ed.), The Other India: Overseas Indians and their Relationship - Proceedings of a Seminar. Delhi, Arnold Heinemann. 1979.
- 2 The Statesman. 5 August 1980.
For their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper, I am grateful to Dr Prem Prasad, Mr Rajesh Chandra and Mrs Holly Fong, all of the University of the South Pacific, Suva, Fiji. I am responsible for any errors of omission and commission in the paper.
- 3 Bahadur Singh, The Other India. pp. 259-61. A detailed, up-to-date and accurate number of Indians present in different countries is provided.
- 4 Two succinct yet comprehensive accounts are provided in Chandra Jayawardena, "Migration and Social Change: A Survey of Indian Communities Overseas", Geographical Review, Vol. LVIII. 1968. pp. 426-49; S. Shigematsu, "Overseas Indians - A Bibliography of Books and Articles, 1873-1971", Asian Studies, Vol. XXI, No. 4. 1975. pp. 25-29.
- 5 See for example issues of the Bengalee in the 1880s, as well as various Royal Commissions of Inquiry whose findings are in British Parliamentary Papers.
- 6 See C.F. Andrews and W.W. Pearson, Report on Indentured Labour in Fiji: An Independent Enquiry. Perth, 1918. Marjorie Sykes (ed.) C.F. Andrews, Representative Writings. New Delhi, 1975. Many of Andrews' articles on overseas Indians at the turn of the century appeared in the Calcutta periodical, The Modern Review.
- 7 See his book, The Fiji of Today. London, 1910. It was this book which prompted Andrews to take up the cause of overseas Indians. He wrote to Burton:

I do feel very strongly indeed that your book was the pioneer and did the pioneer work, and it is due to the book perhaps more "than to any other single cause in the past that the whole indenture system was shown up in its proper perspective".

Quoted in K.L. Gillion, Fiji's Indian Migrants. Melbourne, 1962. p. 178.
- 8 See her most interesting account, A Report on the Social and Moral Conditions of Indians in Fiji. Sydney, 1918.
- 9 Quoted in A.T. Yarwood, "The Overseas Indians as a Problem in Indian, and Imperial Politics at the end of World War One", Australian Journal of Politics and History, Vol. XIV. 1968. p. 207.

- 10 K.L. Gillion, The Fiji Indians: Challenge to European Dominance, 1920-1946. Canberra, 1977. p. 156.
- 11 Ibid., p. 134.
- 12 Hugh Tinker, Separate and Unequal. India and Indians in the British Commonwealth, 1920-1950. St. Lucia, 1976.
- 13 Jawaharlal Nehru, India's Foreign Policy. New Delhi, 1961. p. 127.
- 14 Ibid., p. 134.
- 15 Ibid., p. 129.
- 16 Ibid., p. 131.
- 17 Tinker, Separate and Unequal. p. 172.