

The Indian Diaspora and their role in strengthening Indo-US Ties Swami Vivekananda and the beginnings in Indo-US relations

Dr. Mahua Das

P-29, Kshirode Vidyavinode Avenue, Kolkata- 700003

Swami Vivekananda's immense success at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago (September 1893) and his charismatic appeal to the people of America were the beginning of a new direction in Indo-US Ties. As Romain Rolland has observed in "The life of Vivekananda", the great American poet Walt Whitman (whom Vivekananda called the "Sannyasin of America") had sowed the seeds of Indian thought in USA. As Vivekananda addressed the audience in the Parliament of Religions – Sisters and Brothers of America, hundred arose in their seats and applauded and the American Press recognised him as undoubtedly the greatest figure in the Parliament of Religions.

Over the next few years (1894 to 1897), Vivekananda extensively traveled across the USA not merely delivering public lectures but giving discourses on the Upanishad and closely interacting with his American disciples and laying the foundation of the Vedanta Societies in the USA.

American thinkers have however influenced Indian freedom fighters in a great way. Mahatma Gandhi for instance, was greatly inspired by the writings of Thoreau and Emerson. Lala Lajpat Rai was among the first freedom fighters to visit America. Among littérateurs, Rabindranath Tagore was not influenced by American ideas, but left everlasting images of Indian culture in the minds of Americans. Thus, America's participation in the Indian freedom struggle may not be obvious, but Indians have surely received ideological support from American ideologists.

THE INDIAN DIASPORA IN USA

Indian presence in the United States can be traced back to more than a hundred years when a few Sikhs came to the country to work in the vast agricultural fields of California and Washington's lumber mills. The typical mindset was that these people were uncultured, filthy and hence undesirable. These Sikhs (or Hindus as they were called) became victims of racial abuse and prevented from assimilating into mainstream American life. In fact, they were a part of a wider Asian community that was barred from seeking citizenship in the US. Later on, thanks to political activism from people like J. J. Singh Indians were allowed to seek naturalization. The Indians who now joined the US took up jobs such as taxi drivers, gas station owners and subway newspaper vendors, thereby exposing them to ethnic jokes and racial profiling. The Indian community in the US has now come a long way from such abuses. In fact, they are now a force to reckon with. In fact, successive Indian governments have tried to capitalize on their presence thereby trying to emulate the success achieved by the Chinese diaspora. The Pravasi Bharti program was one such initiative. With respect to the nonresident Indian community settled in the US, here are a few striking features:

- The Indian community is among the highest paid group (based on median income) in the US. They have managed to penetrate almost all niche fields including agriculture, pharmacy, economics, information technology, medicine and other sciences, biotechnology etc.
- The Indian community has registered strong presence in the Silicon Valley. The information technology industry is one place where Indians continue to dominate. This community has demonstrated its power in several occasions. For instance, during the Kargil conflict, Indian immigrants put pressure on the US government to urge a speedy resolution. This was also demonstrated in the wake of the Gujarat earthquake where Indians managed to mobilize a large sum of money over a quick period of time.

President Obama's rhetoric on outsourcing may have been a cause for concern initially, but today the business community has realized that this is unlikely to cause any real concern. There are several factors that may have influenced this thought:

- Outsourcing is a major issue at the domestic level, but more than the loss of service sector jobs, people are lamenting about the loss of jobs in the manufacturing sector. Thus, the debate is more about China than it is about India.
- India has come a long way from the 'call centre' type of outsourcing. Today, it is more about high end service, such as pharma development data analysis, financial market research, legal services etc. In fact, today, Philippines are the largest call centering outfit for America.

While it cannot be denied that the NRI community in the US is powerful, there also exists a few problems that deter Americans from accepting the Indian community wholeheartedly. Some of them include:

- Even as Sikhs tried to protect themselves from racial abuse, they tried to distinguish themselves from other 'blacks' or Afro American people by identifying themselves as Aryans. Even after obtaining civil rights, the Indian community did not leave this stance. In fact, this thought is largely prevalent even today, where Indians try to appease the 'white community' and distance themselves from the 'colored' community.
- They're also charged of being insensitive to sentiments prevalent in their adopted country. For instance, many Indian managed businesses refuse shut shop on the 4th of July. There's also an attempt to institutionalize Indian symbolisms. For instance, there's a school in Jersey that is named after Mahatma Gandhi. There's also a street in the same place that is named after Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. There's also a fear of Hindu militancy that has growing influence in the country.

CHICAGO AND VIVEKANANDA: CONTEMPORARY INDO-US RELATIONS

Many Americans who attended Mr. Pranab Mukherjee, the then finance minister's back-to-back events in Chicago associated with the 150th birth anniversaries of Swami Vivekananda and Rabindranath Tagore expressed a tinge of regret that Calcutta was not one of Chicago's "sister cities". That association went to Delhi in 2001 because the national capital was then perceived as more representative of the upswing in India-US relations that has begun in earnest a year earlier with the widely-heralded visit of the then president, Bill Clinton, to India.

Many Chicagoans recalled during Mukherjee's whistle stop visit that for decades, India has been trying to revive and broaden the imprint of Vivekananda on their city where he delivered his famous address to the Parliament of World Religions 119 years ago and to kindle an interest in Tagore. Where Mukherjee made a significant difference last weekend was in diverting Vivekananda and Tagore birth anniversaries away from the nostalgia for the past and in turning the commemorations into a celebration of India's future.

Such an approach made it possible for contemporary Americans to relate to these two great Indians differently for a change, breaking from previously sterile efforts that were archaic and unimaginative. Mukherjee made it clear in his interactions in Chicago that this emphasis on India's future would guide his approach as chairman of the national implementation committee for Vivekananda commemoration as well.

India's decision to set up a "Vivekananda Chair for Indian studies" at the University of Chicago is in line with the city's tradition of encouraging scholarship and expanding academic horizons. Typical of that tradition is the University of Chicago's unique position as the only university in all of north America to offer instruction in Malayalam, Marathi and Telegu. This university is all set to open its centre in New Delhi later this year.

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