

## The Indian Diaspora: A Pacific Perspective<sup>1</sup>

Satendra Nandan

Almost a decade ago I was invited to Delhi to participate and celebrate the Inaugural Pravasi Bharitya Divas on 9 January 2003. It was a magnificent and momentous occasion; around 2000 overseas Indians from 63 countries, continents and islands, were present, each remembering and paying tribute to Mother India from which their ancestors or they had migrated to many parts of the world. Hardly any modern nation doesn't have a person of Indian descent in its society, not to mention the Red Indians or Ameri-Indians.

Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee was the Prime Minister of India and he stood tall among his colourful comrades. I still remember the two poetic lines he flourished :

*Hum sab hain ek pariwar;  
Khula hamesha hamara dwar!*

It was truly a celebratory and generous occasion. There was quite a contingent from the Pacific, mainly Fiji and New Zealand, including the future Governor-General of New Zealand, Dr Anand Satyanand.

This is my second Pravasi Bharitya Divas—perhaps a prelude to the annual occasion in January in Delhi. I'm happy to be here amongst you all and delighted that this is being held in Sydney, a Pacific city with the Harbour Bridge as its bridging symbol: on which we can hang our coats of the past and stitch a world for the future.

On that first occasion, I remember listening to Amartya Sen and VS Naipaul, the two recent Nobel laureates of Indian origin, representing two phases of the Indian Diaspora—Naipaul's sensibility has its roots in the indenture experience, 1830-1920; Sen is the product of the post-independence India, the modern diaspora, now belatedly part of Australia.

<sup>1</sup> A Talk at the Regional Overseas Indian conference organized in Sydney, November 10-12, 2013.

But there's an Ancient Indian Diaspora which is relevant to our inheritance in this part of the world. It's almost two millennia old—that is how we've Bali and Borubodur—pilgrims and teachers who travelled to spread the noble philosophy of the spiritual awakenings of India and spread the word long before the more recent religions began creating a converted world. They structured societies, shaped kingdoms and cultivated civilizations.

And even before that our terrestrial connections with the original people of Australia when the island continent was an integral part of the vast Asian landmass. Geography more than history then determined the configurations of world consciousness: The idea of 'discovery' is deeply suspect. There were worlds and civilizations on the move long before Europe 'discovered' the world was round and the earth revolved round the sun.

But today in our contemporary and cosmopolitan world, I wish to talk briefly about the indenture Diaspora: from the 1830s this system was introduced to transport around 2 million Indians to many parts of the British, Dutch and French colonies. During 1879-1920 over 60,000 children, women and men, were transplanted in the islands of Fiji to serve the British and Australian interests in economic and political terms and to protect the way of life of the indigenous community.

This is a unique fragment in imperial history known for genocide and decimation of native populations so painfully explored and apologized for today. To have uprooted communities 10,000 miles away from a sub-continent to bring them across the seven seas, to prevent the dislocation of native population on the small islands of the South Pacific : Is there another story of such a migration in history?

Most of these Indians were illiterate; they had little idea of history, less of geography; they had never seen a ship, a sea-wave or an island. Fiji is a revealing case — the pre-colonial, the colonial and the postcolonial co-exist even today. Ninety percent of all land in Fiji is communally owned, exactly the opposite in Australia where terra nullius ruled unchallenged at least into the 1990s. This deepest dispossession of the first Fijians did not take place in Fiji – a page of history to be proud of. Yet, all the racist coups in Fiji were shamelessly perpetrated by an indigenous elite whose greed for power and privilege exceeded their ideas of freedom and development—the sacrifices and accommodation a modern nation makes to enjoy and ensure the freedoms of all its citizens.

Fiji's first governor Sir Arthur Gordon created a 'Gordonian' knot and introduced the policy of protecting native interests, especially land,

from his rapacious compatriots once Fiji became a crown colony; indeed in 1874 Fiji was ceded to Queen Victoria—perhaps the only case in colonial history when a Deed of Cession of sovereignty is celebrated with special ties to the British Crown. Gordon had an experience of indentured Indians in the islands of Mauritius and Trinidad : how a barren colony could become prosperous through the labour of a displaced people cruelly called ‘coolies’. You can hear the term even today in India used without any sensitivity or shame to its historical irony. Yet the Father of India was most prophetically called the coolie barrister!

Thereby of course hang many a tale until the first Fijian coups by a third-ranking colonel of the Royal Fiji Military Forces. For instance, no-one cared for the dislocation of the indentured Indians who had lived in their villages for millennia, barely travelling beyond five kilometres of their ancient boundaries. Yet they were flung all over the empire with little consideration for their fate or future. These were men and women in their prime of life. ‘Stolen generations’ have echoes beyond our island continent.

Indenture was one step away from slavery—it had an expiry date : after ten years of agreement, you may get a passage back to India. No-one of Indian origin has, in my readings, written a comprehensive human history of this one hundred years of servitude. The word ‘gimit’ comes from the pidgin distortion of the word ‘agreement’, sealed with the left thumb mark.

Gandhi, whose day of return to India on January 9, after 21 years among the girmityas and small merchants in South Africa, is now commemorated as the Pravasi Bharitya Divas. It is a deeply significant memorial to the greatest and noblest Indian. To think he came from the business caste and was a lawyer boggles the mind and baulks the imagination in the context of today’s many business operators and professionals. His most formative years were spent among the indentured and small merchants in a racially discriminated and divided country. To understand this is to realize the achievement of the First Girmitya, ‘pahila girmitya’, as he’s sometimes called; and is the Father of modern India.

How deeply he civilized imperial powers and empowered the dispossessed and marginalized peoples world-wide. It is a narrative of epic grandeur. It is a gimit legacy too. He never said that the Emperor had no clothes; instead he remarked half-nakedly, with an extraordinary power of observation, that the Emperor is wearing enough clothes for both of us! He’s the pilgrim hero of this diaspora beyond the Indian Ocean: one with a lathi, not with bows and arrows or the deadly mace of Brigadier-General Hanuman.

In the October 25 issue of the weekly Guardian an article says how ‘Gandhi’s blanking of the Africans is the black hole at the heart of his saintly mythology.’ The writer, aptly named Patrick French, misses the point. The point is precisely that of the human soul which doesn’t belong to any race or nation. The soul-force of a single person can achieve miracles—it’s limitless with infinite possibilities but no boundaries—the atom is an atom containing unfathomable energy, both creative and destructive. It has no borders or barriers. Gandhi gave a war-weary, colonially corrupt and corrupting world, a way out. He tried it with a people he knew best but he also knew his example will inspire humanity for generations yet unborn, black and white, brown and yellow, on every continent and on many an island.

So what is unique yet universal that the Indian Diaspora can contribute to this part of our global existence? This was a question I’d raised in my talk in Delhi a decade ago. I feel they have a deeper resonance and relevance to Australasia. Indian mind, as we all know, had been severely colonized over centuries—colonialism like the bee sucked the nectar to make honey but it also pollinated the flower and left its sting in not a few decaying monoliths among its ambitious and scattered ruins.

When I first went to Delhi, more than fifty years ago, I was astonished to see students reading only English literature in their Honours classes at the capital university, 12 years after independence and partition. One of the greatest struggles for freedom and the brutal imperial crime of partition had disappeared in the dust storms of Delhi and the stained dawn of Indian renaissance.

Today all that has changed quite radically and Indian writers, artists, activists, academics, scientists, professionals, public servants, business men and women have made a vital difference. The global language English has been a more creative weapon than missiles in shaping our thinking and imagining. And through English a new awareness of India is growing in the mind of Australasia. The population has quadrupled and the weariness of the independence struggle is replaced by a nation’s nascent and latent energy of deeper critical self-awareness.

Trade and business are important; professions are significant; military and strategic alliances can be meaningful. But these arrangements can change overnight. Japan is a case in point: in 1905 it was the first Asian nation to defeat a European power, Russia; within 40 years in 1945, it became an abject and defeated colony of another imperialism, American, due to its hubris and imitation of the imprints of imperialism.

So is there something different that the Indian diaspora can contrib-

ute—different from European, American, Chinese, Japanese world-views—as India did in its ancient diaspora? That religious view of the world is no longer adequate—the delights and discontents of democracy and joys of secularism are now part of our daily bread. The universe is enlarging; so is our knowledge of the stem-cell and the cosmos.

India, to a large extent, did it without, I feel, sacrificing its sacred soul—a soul made of many streams and myriad dreams. Bollywood is generally a superficial but popular expression of this dynamic cultural palimpsest of civilizations. Think for a moment: Ancient Europe was converted to Christianity, Arabia to Islam, China to Communism but in India very distinct and different sources of the self have been developing for millennia, with all its detritus of caste and customs, religious humbug and cosmic kidding, but the quintessence of India remains. Its many vulnerabilities strengthen its inner resources: nothing much grows on marbled floors.

Most Indians always thought of going to England, then Europe, then America, followed by Canada. This is where the diasporan now is. Australasia is a late discovery for reasons of colour and imaginative courage. Think different, Gandhi showed. Discover a new world by sailing in a new direction.

If Indians studied their history well, they would have come to this island continent long ago—they came to the Indonesian islands but because they thought the world was flat, taking their ships further south could make them disappear without a trace in an oceanic chasm. So they never explored it further—if they had we could have a better Aussie cricket team here today!

But be that as it may, I wish to talk a bit about the two talks I heard at that first Pravasi Bharitya Divas in Delhi in January 2003. Amratya Sen talked about the kupamanduka, frogs in a well—a warning against isolationism that recurs in several old Sanskrit texts, told Sen. He was referring to an attitude in a segment of Indian intelligentsia which has a very constricted view of Indian heritage and history. He argued that the scientific, cultural, political, economic, rationalistic and civil history of the world would have been very limited indeed had we lived like well-frogs.

The celebration of Indian civilization can and must go hand in hand with an affirmation of India's active role in a global world. The existence of a large diaspora abroad is itself a part of India's interactive presence. In short we cannot allow ourselves to be diminished by any ideology that limits our shared and unfinished humanity. This view of India has done enormous damage to the Indian image and it's not the sign of a confident and creative nation and Indians everywhere pay a psychological price

when ugly publicity is spread across our internetted world with which we're inexorably interconnected. 2000 people killed in the state of Gujarat in 2002 had cast a dark shadow on that first Pravasi Bharitya Divas in New Delhi in 2003.

I vividly recall Sen using that metaphor, frogs in a well, to describe aspects of a fundamentalist sensibility. It is both moronic and an oxymoron. Sen was for a secular democracy giving security and prosperity to its citizens and liberty to the individuals struggling for human rights that cuts across all national borders like our climatic concerns or human rights.

It is in this that Indian Diaspora can make signal and singular contribution to our growing Australian civilization—from the ancient Aboriginal roots to the green shoots of migrants. And yet issues of Aboriginal situation, Fijian coups and asylum seekers hardly feature in our Diaspora discussions. I wonder why no Aboriginal leader or thinker is part of this diaspora in Sydney? Or a Pacific statesman? Surely Indian diaspora in Australasia must include the South Pacific leaders as part of our conversation.

We make excellent public servants, babus, and shopkeepers but challenging the status quo is not our concern; as long as we've some status, others can have the quo. So I think we in the diaspora could afford a few public intellectuals in Australasia. Anyone who has read even a few essays in Sen's *The Argumentative Indian* would discover a rich and remarkable tradition of the rational and scientific Indian mind's contributions to the world culture.

Too much of mawkish religiosity has created a veil that hides the great and secular vision of our universe and the Indians were pioneers—there. The guru-syndrome has often been gross and gratuitously galling and self-deceiving. It makes India small: the wonder of the world, so splendidly evoked in the lines of the Vedas, is lost in false values of exclusive cultural identity. A sure sign of a people lacking in confidence in their acts of creativity and imagination and the daring of their ancestors.

And this brings me to Vidia Naipual—the first person of Indian origin to win a Nobel prize in Literature after Tagore exactly a hundred years ago in 1913. Not that this is the ultimate accolade—after all, Gandhi never got the Nobel for Peace but Kissinger did! But that says more about the Prize committee not the individual—and Gandhi's quip that 'western civilization will be good idea' is still valid.

Naipual, coming from the Indenture diaspora, is one of the sharpest critics of India and its diaspora. His talk in Delhi, I recall, was on Ananda Coomarasamy, whose work is hardly remembered and studied in India.

His complaint was that even the Banaras Hindu University, where Coomarasamy taught, couldn't keep his papers in its archives for future scholars. He was the author of *The Dance of Shiva*, a seminal text on Indian thought and culture.

To Naipaul this was a great loss—not of El Dorado but of Indian scholarship. And it is this he laments deeply. Is the country too full of ruins, mainly of temples and tombs? We all know the great universities of the world were created from churches and monasteries; why did Indian civilization fail to build universities and institutions of democracy—huge palaces, forts, tombs, temples everywhere but no great institutions of science and art, writing and research, of serious inquiries and scholarship, in the markings of civilizations where civil liberties should be paramount and scientific inquiry is given its due.

Naipaul mistakenly took Gandhi to task for leaving nothing of enduring value in South Africa. Yet, Gandhi's was one life that made him weep. But Gandhi was made in the imperial world, and even he had his limitations.

Today of course Indian writers, scholars, artists, scientists, political thinkers are shaping the contours of thoughts, and ideas of modernity. It's here, I think, the Indian Diaspora can make lasting contributions to Australasian educational landscapes, intellectual horizons and international relations.

The flowering of the Indian democracy is the greatest story of our world—no country faced greater challenges after its brutal and unnecessary vivisection, but today, with all its problems, a multitudinous, multi-layered political culture has emerged against the tragedies of partition, caste, patriarchy, Cold War, etc., etc. India remains an example in our increasingly plural, multifaceted, multiplex global search for a fairer and better world.

Fiji is a small island nation in the vast Pacific Ocean.

Its new constitution gives one hope that Fiji can move towards a democratic future after four coups—three of them unnecessary and racist—against the gimit people and their defenceless dependents. It seems to me the Australasian Indian diaspora and India can play a positive role in making Fiji a truly multicultural society of promise and achievements unheard of in the South Pacific. The diaspora can contribute in every field of endeavour and human relationships without the crutches of race and religion, caste or colour.

The Fijian diaspora is another story for another occasion. One hopes

this occasion will arouse deeper interest in Fiji and the Indian roots and routes of the diaspora will be written, read and contemplated on with some serious understanding: For there's no country, big or small, like Fiji in Australasia .

We can, with others, give the Pacific its true meaning—generosity of heart and the peace of mind. And begin to understand the new horizons before us. This is a great gift of all our ancestors.

#### Author

**Satendra Nandan** is a former member of Parliament and cabinet minister of Fiji; he was also a commissioner to help draft a new constitution of Fiji in 2012. Currently he's a Professor Emeritus at the Donald Horne Institute for creative research and culture, Faculty of Arts and Design, University of Canberra, and an Adjunct Professor, Centre for Applied Philosophy and Professional Ethics, CSU and Melbourne. Email: Satendra.Nandan@gmail.com