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The Indian Diaspora in Canada: Looking Back and Ahead

*Nalini Kant Jha**

Though it may be an exaggeration to call Canada a land of immigrants, yet a sizeable section of the Canadian population comprises of immigrants including those from India.¹ The people of Indian origin in Canada today are the largest component of peoples of South Asian origin in Canada. Their population at present is about 700,000. About three-fourths of the recent Indian immigrants are educated, professionals, skilled workers, businessmen and entrepreneurs. They are economically well off and politically active. Most of them form informal communities, through links between relatives and friends who share common ethnic, linguistic and religious roots.

The success story of the Indian diaspora in Canada has, however, not come so easily. Like other Asians, they had to face racial prejudices of the White Canadians and their immigration policy. It was only after a long struggle and untold sufferings that non-White immigrants could get equality in Canada, though still racialism prevails in several

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disguised forms. This paper, therefore, examines the past and present of the Indian community in Canada in the light of the Canadian immigration policy.

Racial Prejudices

In 1966, a Canadian government white paper, indicating governmental policy, contained the following resolution: "There will be no discrimination in immigration by reason of race, colour, or religion."² This was not the case earlier. At the time of Confederation in 1867, only 8 per cent of Canada's population were other than French or English. The fathers of Confederation concentrated only on the British-French duality and ignored any other kind of ethnic diversity, although British North America had already contained "significant numbers of people of German and Dutch origin, well-established black and Jewish communities."³ In fact, the Canadian government earlier employed various legal devices to maintain the barrier against immigration from the Indian subcontinent. Canada's first *Immigration Act*⁴ for instance, though did not explicitly mention 'Race' as a criterion for immigration, yet it implicitly assumed that the bulk of immigrants would come from Britain, with smaller number from northern Europe. This was evident from the fact that immigrant agents were located throughout Britain with one exception on the continent of Europe. Not surprisingly, from Confederation in 1867 to 1896 fully 90 per cent of Canadian immigrants came from Britain.

This prevailing view towards immigration was rooted in their assumption about the 'out standing superiority of the Anglo-Saxon race.' While they perceived the Anglo Saxons as genetically superior and pre-disposed towards liberal democratic ideals, they assumed that others, most notably the Asiatic races, were suited to despotism and satisfied with

meagre material returns in life. Admitting these 'inferior' peoples, according to them, was therefore likely to destroy Canada itself. ⁵ Anglo-Saxon White superiority was thus taken for granted. Those races genetically incapable of assimilation must be kept out; if any crept in, they must be kept apart and denied participation in the full range of Canadian institutions. To do otherwise would be to risk Canada's survival as a British nation. ⁶ Accordingly, the closer the immigrant in physical cultural similarity to Englishmen, the more desirable he was as an immigrant. The hierarchy of desirable immigrants began with English and American Whites, then Northern and Western European, then Central and Eastern Europeans, excluding Jews, then strange religious sects like the Hutterites, Mennonites, and Doukhobors; and last the Asian immigrants.

Not surprisingly, Indian diaspora in Canada inherited the above-mentioned attitudes and policy frames against non-Anglo-Saxons in general and Asians, including Indians, in particular. The British Columbia legislature, for instance, disfranchised Indians and imposed various economic and social restrictions on Asians like Indians, Chinese and Japanese. ⁷ Still, the Indian immigrants did participate in the economy, though unwittingly, by entering the so-called 'White jobs' in the West Coast lumber industry. This led to physical attacks against Indians and their expulsion from the American state of Washington in early September 1907. Consequently, the Indian refugees from this conflict moved to Vancouver just as a ship containing another 900 Indian was about to arrive in that port city. This threatened flood of Asian immigrants was one factor in precipitating the infamous Vancouver race riots of September 1907. ⁸ Though Indians could save themselves from these attacks, because they did not inhabit the central area, where the riots took

place, yet they could not escape from the open hostility of both press and public in BC. A public meeting in Vancouver unanimously passed a resolution, which declared, "The influx of Asians is detrimental and hurtful to the best interests of the Dominion, from the standpoint of citizenship, public morals, and labour conditions."⁹

Accordingly, the Canadian government introduced regulations that made it mandatory for Asian immigrants to possess a sum of \$200, considered high enough to serve as a distinctive, and to arrive in Canada only by means of a continuous journey from their country of origin. These regulations were first introduced as orders-in-council in 1908 and then incorporated into new Immigration Act of 1910.

As a result of these regulations, immigration from India into Canada declined drastically after 1908, from 2,500 during 1907-08, to only a few dozen per year. This implied that South Asians living in Canada could not bring their wives and children. Family reunification, therefore, became the primary campaign theme and the chief moral argument for South Asian organizations over the next several decades. The *Khalsa Divan Society*, initiated in 1907 as a Sikh religious organization, led the campaign on behalf of all South Asians.¹⁰

The Canadian government, nonetheless, continued to be intransigent in guarding its borders that was vividly manifested in the infamous *Komagata Maru* case in which the regulations preventing the landing of a chartered ship with 376 South Asian passengers, which reached shores of Vancouver in May 1914, were tested in BC supreme court. The court decided that the passengers in the ship must be deported. Pronouncing the judgement, Justice McPhillips observed that the conception of Indians about life and ideals

of society were fundamentally different to the Anglo-Saxon; Indians were unsuited to Canadian laws and, if admitted, they might annihilate the nation and change its whole potential complexity; introduce Oriental ways as against European ways, eastern civilization for western civilization, and all the dire results that would naturally flow there from.¹¹

Towards a Multicultural Society

The outbreak of the First World War, hardly a month after the *Komagata Maru* incident, obliged the Canadian government to relax its immigration policy, as the British who required India's wholehearted cooperation in its war against the axis powers, urged the White Dominions to be more generous in receiving Indian immigrants, especially the wives and children of resident men. The issue was discussed at Imperial War Conference, 1917-18, and the Paris Peace Conference, 1919. Canada agreed in principle of family reunification and drafted an order-in-council at the end of 1919, but the Canadian authorities implemented this order only five years after.¹²

The economic depression of the 1930s saw a severe decline in immigration into Canada, as it made immigration economically unattractive for the Canadian hosts. In September 1930 an order-in-council declared, "The landing in Canada of any immigrant of any Asiatic race is hereby prohibited, except...the wife or unmarried child under 18 years of age, of any Canadian citizen legally admitted to and resident in Canada, who is in a position to receive and care for his dependents."¹³ This regulation proved an effective barrier against Indian immigration into Canada for next two decades.

The outbreak of the Second World, however, produced a shift in the White-dominated mindset of the Canadians. For,

a war against Nazi racism directly challenged policies and practices based on racial preferences. To this was added a renewed campaign by the *Khalsa Diwan Society* and other South Asian organizations, submitting briefs to parliament protesting the objectionable features of immigration regulations. Canada's participation in the United Nations and its declaration against racial discrimination, and membership in a multi-racial Commonwealth of equal partners after the Second World War made it difficult for that country to maintain immigration regulations, which denied admission to certain people on ground of race. The beginning of civil rights movement in the US had also an impact on Canadian thinking. Besides, the economic prosperity Canada enjoyed contributed in turn to a much more relaxed attitude toward racial and ethnic minorities.

As a consequence, changes occurred in conventional wisdom during the post-war years. The Trade and Labour Congress, for instance, removed from its Platform of Principles calling for exclusion of all races that cannot be properly assimilated into national life of Canada.¹⁴ Within the decades after war, Ontario passed a *Fair Accommodation Practices Act*, which obliged businesspersons to serve customers without caring for their race, colour, or origin. Other provinces emulated this Ontario law. It was in the same spirit the British Columbia granted franchise to South Asians and Chinese in 1947 and to Japanese in 1949.

Canada's immigration policy followed this shift in Canadian thinking. Within two years after the war it became evident that Canada was engaged in an economic expansion that would require a large increase in population and labour power to sustain. The low birth rate during the Depression contributed to a shortage of workers by the late 1940s, which only immigration could solve. Canada therefore liberalized

entry since 1947. Most of the beneficiaries of this liberalization were, however, from Europe. But when India became independent and objected to Canadian regulation as an insult and threat to Commonwealth unity, Canada signed an agreement with India in 1951, which permitted 150 Indians to enter Canada under their own qualifications, in addition to the close family members of Canadian citizens admissible under existing regulations. In 1952 the Liberal government introduced a new Immigration Act to consolidate the numerous post-war changes in the regulations. While considerable restrictions still remained, for the first time since 1910 the word 'race' was omitted from the Act and replaced by a more benign term, 'ethnic group.' A change in this regulation in 1956 carried the process forward by removing all references to 'Asians' or 'race'. However, the new orders retained a clear hierarchy of preferential categories.

This forced the East Indian Welfare Association to lobby in Ottawa for changing hierarchy of preferential categories. But instead of doing that the Liberal government of Louis St. Laurent merely enlarged the quota for entry of Indians to placate them. The Conservative government of John Diefenbaker too failed to completely remove racial discrimination from Canada's immigration policy through changes introduced by it in immigration regulations in 1962. For, these changes though removed all references to geographical or ethnic preferences and declared required skills as the main criteria for permitting entry of independent immigrants; the range of relatives who could be sponsored by Canadian citizens was still broader for those of European origin.

It was only when a large number of unqualified relatives being sponsored by European immigrants caused concern

in Canada in the mid-60s that the Canadian government through introduction of 'points system' in 1967 really made skill alone as criteria for admission of non-dependent relatives and thereby eliminated advantages given to the Europeans in 1962 regulations. This led to considerable increase in the number of Indian immigrants; from 529 in 1962 to 12,868 in 1974. Finally, the Pierre Trudeau government approved in 1971 an official policy of multiculturalism within a bilingual framework. Accordingly, the Immigration Act of 1976 declared family re-unification, non-discrimination, concern for refugees and the promotion of Canada's economic, social, demographic and cultural goals as fundamental objectives of its immigration policy.¹⁵

The process of Canada's evolution as a multicultural society got a further boost from the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, a part of the new Constitution, introduced by Prime Minister Trudeau in 1982. While Article 15 of the Charter guarantees racial equality, Art. 27 states that the entire Charter shall be interpreted in a manner consistent with the preservation and enhancement the multicultural heritage of Canadians. In continuation of this policy, Prime Minister, Brian Mulroney, brought in the Multiculturalism Act, which made diversity central feature of the Canadian national vision and an organizing principle of Canadian life and law.¹⁶

Racism in Disguise

The dawn of multicultural era in Canada in the early 1970s notwithstanding, unfortunately racial prejudices and practices have been continuing in varying degrees and forms in that country.¹⁷ A sociological study in Toronto found that 16 per cent of Canadian population is extremely racist, 35 per cent are inclined towards some degree of racism, 19 per cent are extremely tolerant and 30 per cent is inclined towards

tolerance. While the blacks are no less victims of racism in Canada, as compared to Indians, they are more acceptable to Canadians. According to the Toronto survey nearly 50 per cent of respondents felt that the most of the people in Toronto were more opposed to Indians than Blacks, as they regarded Indian and Pakistani life styles more dissimilar to Canadian way of life than those of the Blacks. This is partly because of a general lack of knowledge about South Asians in Canada. The author of this survey therefore observes:

What this suggests is that less is known about Indians and Pakistanis: respondents have less information about them and are more socially distanced from them. Sentiment against them, however, is strong and perceived sentiment against them is far stronger than against Blacks. Prejudice in this respect is strong despite lack of clear-cut information about these groups. What appears to be generally known is that Asians are, or are thought to be, culturally very different to Canadians. Perhaps much of the prejudice against Asians is merely picked as a generalised attitude in much the same way that term 'Paki' is being used by youngsters who do not really know what it refers to.¹⁸

Racial prejudice against the Indians in Canada is not only stronger as compared to the Blacks, but also as compared to the Chinese. According to a study conducted in a small western Canadian city, Saskatoon, respondents showed great differences in attitudes towards East Indians and Chinese. While 41.8 per cent of the respondents were opposed to East Indians immigrating to Canada, only 26.5 per cent were opposed to Chinese immigration into Canada. Trying to explain about this attitudinal differences towards the East Indians vis-a-vis the Chinese, the author of this study speculates:

Why the Chinese tend to be perceived more favourably than the East Indians is unclear. It may be related to increased trade between Western Canada and China after formal diplomatic relationship between the two countries was established in the early seventies. This may be in turn enhancing the international image of China and consequently improving the social status of the overseas Chinese. In contrast, India is largely perceived by the general public as an underdeveloped country haunted by problems of poverty and overpopulation. These images, in turn, may be continuing to tarnish public perceptions of the East Indians in Canada.¹⁹

Whatever may be the cause for variance in disliking by mainstream Canadians of the Indian minorities vis-a-vis other minority ethnic groups, is clear that racism still persists in Canada notwithstanding move towards multiculturalism. Two polls conducted in 1981 and 1989 further confirm this fact. A Gallup Poll conducted on behalf of the Canadian Government's Department of Multiculturalism suggested that at least 12 per cent of Canadians were hard-core racist who would like to cut off all non-White immigration into Canada. 31 per cent of those surveyed wished to preserve Canada for Whites. On the other hand, 34 per cent pledged support to local organizations working towards 'multiculturalism and harmony among races.'²⁰

Another opinion poll conducted in February 1989 by the Angus Reid polling firm for the Federal Immigration Department concluded that while almost half of all Canadians favour an increase in immigration, concern about racism appears to be on the rise. In a special report, titled, "An Angry Racial Backlash," a Canadian weekly news magazine commented: "A growing number of Canadians express intolerance not only of identifiable minorities, but

towards the idea of ethnic diversity itself."²¹ A close observer of racism in Canada therefore asserts, "Much of the rhetoric (about being multicultural mosaic) has simply been wishful thinking. There has been a long history of racism and discrimination against ethnic minorities in ... Canada, along with strong pressures for conformity to WASP ways."²²

An Enterprising Community

These racial prejudices notwithstanding, the evolution of Canada from a nation openly advocating racial discrimination to a declared adherent of multiculturalism and consequent changes in its immigration policy have enabled the generally talented and hardworking Indian community in that country to gradually increase their numbers and establish themselves in every walk of Canadian life, including politics. Today there are about 700,000 Canadians of Indian origin.²³ This figure consists of about 500,000 people of Indian origin besides those who came from East Africa, Fiji, the Caribbean and other places. In the past quarter-century, Canadian citizens of Indian origin have entered every economic, social, political and cultural corner of that country.

A fairly large proportion of Indian immigrants have entered Canada as professional, semi-professional, skilled labourers and entrepreneurs. In addition to direct employment opportunities, Canadian universities and research institutions have also been attracting a considerable number of Indian students. Many of them, particularly scientists and engineers eventually got settled after completion of their education.

Not surprisingly, a survey conducted about Canadians of Indians origin in 1978 in Ottawa-Hull area revealed that the majority of them "fall into managerial/professional

occupational category and have annual family incomes in excess of \$30,000." The survey further indicated that 81 per cent of them were Canadian citizens, the median length of their stay in Canada was 9-10 years, 74 per cent were less than 43 years old, 92 per cent were married and 39 per cent had four members in their family. The level of their educational qualifications was considerably above the Canadian averages and 55 per cent had postgraduate degrees, 19 per cent were graduates and 17 per cent had other qualifications.²⁴

The above-mentioned survey based on a capital city of Ottawa may not truly represent the socio-economic profile of the entire Indian community in Canada. In cities like Vancouver, Toronto and Montreal, the Indian community is perhaps occupationally more diverse consisting of all strata and classes of people. In fact, occupation distribution of Indians in Canada as a whole suggests that about 20 per cent of them are professionals and senior and middle level managers; 37 per cent comprises middle level occupations and 43 per cent of them are in lower level jobs such as semi-skilled manual workers and sales and service workers. The presence of Indians in the Canadian agriculture sector is also noteworthy, especially in British Columbia. The mean or median income of male Indian immigrants is therefore higher than that of their counterparts from other parts of Asia, Africa and Latin America, but far lower than those from the US, Europe and Canadian born population. On the contrary, the income level of the Indian females is lowest of all the immigrant groups in Canada. On the whole, however, the Indian community is economically much better off than any other major minority in Canada; only 23.8 per cent of Indian immigrant lived below poverty line in 1996, as compared to

36.6 per cent of immigrants from other parts of the Third World.²⁵

Of late the Indian community has established its foothold in the political sphere as well. In federal elections held in 2004, for instance, a record number of 8 Punjabis, including 2 women, have been elected for the House of Commons. Out of these MPs, 4 have got second terms. Among the ethnic Indian winners are Gurwant and Nina Grewal, a Punjabi couple, who won from adjoining boroughs; Newton North Delta and Fleetwood-Port Wells respectively. The Liberal Parliamentary Party's Ujjane Dosanjh, the first non-White prime minister of British Columbia, won the federal election for the first time. He was confidante of the present Canadian prime Minister, Paul Martin. The other winners of Indian origin are: Dr. Ruby Dhalla, Gurbax Malhi, Deepak Oberoi, Rahim Jaffer and Navdeep Bains. Incidentally, Bains and Malhi will be the only two turbaned Sikhs to sit in Canada's House of Commons. The fact that Gurwant Grewal could become an MP in less than five years after acquiring citizenship demonstrates political skills and adjusting capabilities of the Indian diaspora in Canada.²⁶

A Bridge between Two Multi-cultural Societies

The growing clout of the Indian diaspora in Canada has enabled them to influence India-Canada relations both positively and negatively. But a review of literature on the subject suggests that while several scholars have expressed concern about the negative aspects of 'brain drain' from India to Canada,²⁷ positive aspects of this process have been appreciated only recently.²⁸ The later category of scholars has approached the problem from the perspective of modern diaspora formations and their role in international relations. They argue that ethnic diasporas play an important role in

modern international politics through various forms of networking and commerce, economic investment and remittance and political interests.

Viewed thus, the role of the Canadians of Indian origin in influencing India-Canada relations is both positive and negative. To take the positive role first, India can look not only for their remittances and investment, but also for their skills. Their participation in voluntary development projects is also important. Politically, they can act as lobbyists for influencing Canadian policy towards India in a favourable direction.²⁹

As regards remittance, the early Indian immigrants in Canada saved on an average about 50 per cent of their wages, which they sent home to their kith and kin despite of lower wages. Now with a sizeable number of the Indian community in Canada, they are an important source of remittance to India. As found by a scholar on the basis of his study of the Sikhs in California, these remittance are being employed to enhance status, gain philanthropic prestige, maintain *izzat* (prestige), improve marriage potential of eligible family members, acquire political power or influence, demonstrate religious devotion, increase the potential for the education of siblings or more distant kinsmen, and of course, to finance additional immigration.³⁰

As part of the Canadian population, the Indian community in Canada have thus emerged as a component force in shaping future policies of their land of adoption. By their presence they participate in the articulation of Canada's evolving identity. While they once influenced Canadian immigration policy from outside, now they operate from inside as an integral part of the Canadian multicultural nation.

Endnotes

- 1 Nearly 30 percent of Canada's population are of other than British and French communities. Twenty percent of these are immigrants to Canada, many of whom, more than 3 million people, came to Canada after 1945 and represent more than fifty different ethnic groups. See William Metcalf, ed., *Understanding Canada: A Multidisciplinary Introduction to Canadian Studies* (New York: New York University Press, 1982), p.364. For an overview of Indian immigration to the US, see Nalini Kant Jha, "The Americans of Indian Origin: Bridging the Gulf between the Two Democracies," in Ajay Dubey, ed., *Indian Diaspora: Global Identity* (New Delhi: Kalunga Publications, 2003), pp. 155-76.
- 2 "Immigration," *Canada Today*, vol.5, no.1, January 1974, p.3.
- 3 Howard Palmer, "Reluctant Hosts: Anglo Canadian Views of Multiculturalism in the Twentieth Century," in *Second Canadian Conference on Multiculturalism* (Ottawa: Ministry of Supply and Services, 1976), pp.84-85.
- 4 *Statutes of Canada*, 1869, c. 10.
- 5 Canada, House of Commons, *Debates*, 1 June 1914, p.4563.
- 6 Speech delivered by R. L. Borden at Vancouver, 24 September 1907, cited in James W. St G. Walker, "The Canadian Connection: Canadian Identity, Immigration Policy and the Indian Diaspora in Historical Perspective," in S. D Singh and Mahavir Singh, eds., *Indians Abroad* (Kolkata: Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies, 2003), p.67.
- 7 *Statutes of Canada*, 1885, c.71; 1900, c. 32; 19903, c. 8; 19923, c. 38.
- 8 Howard Sugimoto, "The Vancouver Riots of 1907: A Canadian Episode," in H. Conroy and T Miyakawa, eds., *East Across the Pacific* (Santa Barbara, 1972), pp. 92-126; and N. Buchignani, D. Indira, and R. Srivastava, *Continuous Journey: A Social History of South Asians in Canada* (Toronto, 1985), pp. 17-27.
- 9 Cited in Walker, n. 6, p. 69.
- 10 *ibid.*, p.70.

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- 11 See the judgement of BC Supreme Court in Munshi Singh case (1914) as reported in, *20 British Columbia Reports*, 243, pp 289-92. For a through account of the Kamagata Maru episode, see Hugh Johnson, *The Voyage of Komagata Maru: The Sikh Challenge to Canada's Colour Bar* (New Delhi, 1979).
- 12 Buchignani at all, n. 8, pp. 65-66. Also see N Buchignani and D Indira, "The Political Organization of South Asians in Canada, 1904-1920," in J Dahlie T. Fernando, eds., *Ethnicity, Power and Politics in Canada* (Toronto, 1981), pp.202-32.
- 13 Cited in Walker, n.6,p.71.
- 14 Trade and Labour Congress of Canada, *Proceedings of the Annual Convention, 1947, 1951*; and Canadian Labour Congress, *Proceedings of Founding Convention, 1956*.
- 15 *Statues of Canada, 1976-77*, c.31. Also, John Wood, "East Indians and Canada's New Immigration Policy," *Canadian Public Policy*, vol. 4, 1978, pp. 547-67.
- 16 *Statue of Canada, 1988*, c.31.
- 17 See Peter S. Li, ed., *Race and Ethnic Relations in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1990).
- 18 Frances Henry, *The Dynamics of Racism in Toronto; Research Report*, (Toronto, 1978).
- 19 Peter S. Li, ed., "Prejudice against Asians in a Canadian City," *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, vol.II, no.2, p.75.
- 20 Prakash C. Jain, "Racism in Canada: Some Recent Surveys," *India Quarterly* (New Delhi), vol. 39, no. 2, April-June 1983, pp.193-98.
- 21 Cited in Prakash C. Jain, "Indian Diaspora in Canada," in Dubey, ed., *Indian Diaspora: Global Identity*, n.l,p.199.
- 22 Palmer, n. 3, p.84.
- 23 1981 census of Canada showed 121,445 persons of South Asian origin or ancestry and the 1991 census showed 488,375.
- 24 R. S. Khomani, et al, *A Socio-Economic Profile of Indo-Canadian Community in the Ottawa-Hull Area* (Ottawa, 1982).

- 25 Jain, n.21, p. 203
- 26 *Outlook* (New Delhi), vol.22, no. 27, 12 July 2004, p. 10.
- 27 See, for instance, Prakash C. Jain, "Immigration and Settlement of Indians Abroad," *Sociological Bulletin*, vol. 38, no.1, 1989, pp. 155-68; T. K. Oommen, "Brian Drain or the Migration of Talent?: The Indian Case," *International Migration*, vol. 27, no.3, 1989, pp.411-25; and S. P. Sukhatme and I Mahadevan, "Brian Drain and the IIT Graduates," *Economic and Political Weekly* (Bombay), vol. 23, 1988, pp. 1285-93.
- 28 See, for example, Nathan Glazer, "Introduction," in Sulochana Raghavan Glazer and Nathan Glazer, eds., *Conflicting Images of India and the United States* (Glenn Dale, Maryland: The Riverside Co Publishers, 1990).; Arthur W. Helweg, "The Indian Diaspora: Influence on International Relations," in Gabriel Sheffer, ed., *Modern Diasporas in International Politics* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), pp.305-36; and Myron Weiner, "The Indian Presence in Americas: What Difference will it Make,?" in Glazer and Glazer, eds., *ibid.*, pp.241-26.
- 29 Jain,n.21,p.200.
- 30 Bruce La Brack, "The New Patrons: Sikhs Overseas," in N. Garald Barrier and Verne A. Dusenbery, eds., *The Sikh Diaspora* (New Delhi: Chanakya Publications, 1990), p.263.

