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Source: *Asian Affairs: An American Review*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (Fall, 2005), pp. 189-208

Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30172878>

Accessed: 25-04-2020 15:17 UTC

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The Indian Diaspora in Britain: Political Interventionism and Diaspora Activism

ASAF HUSSAIN

The Indian population has had a global migration history. Since 1834, Indians have migrated to widespread places in the world. The British, during their colonial rule in India, had also taken Indians to their African colonies, where they formed part of an indenture system.¹ This form of servitude which occurred during colonial times has been considered to be another name for slavery.² Although “in India, crossing the seas was prohibited by the sacred Hindu scriptures,” in spite of this restriction, mass migration resulted in “nearly twenty million [people] settled among seventy countries.”³ The colonization of India opened the doors for new migration opportunities and Indians availed themselves. Some, like Dadabhai Naoroji even became a Member of Parliament in 1892, while the British Indian Army fought in Britain’s imperial wars—forty Victoria crosses were awarded to its soldiers between 1912 and 1947.⁴

Mainstream economic migration of Indians to the United Kingdom started taking place during the 1950s. The new states of India and Pakistan were then suffering from fragile economies and manpower exports were beneficial to them. On the other hand, Britain was desperate to receive manpower from its former colonies for its own development. Over the decades many migrant groups settled in Britain. However, the Indian migrant group became one of the most important non-European groups to settle in Britain. First, they were highly developed culturally and satisfied the needs of their community. Secondly, they made important contributions to Britain economically. Thirdly, the Indian migrants have also made significant monetary contributions to the economy of India. Although mainly economical reasons, they were instrumental in embedding Indian migrants within British society.

This article will explore two questions. First, how have Indian migrants raised themselves into becoming the significant minority in a closed culture still characterised by the colonial syndrome? Second, how have successive Indian governments tried to utilize this significant minority?

Diaspora and Development

Disaporas from various regions settled in the Western countries have become very important groups due to their levels of development. These levels of development are judged in three ways. First, this can emanate from the composition of the group and the extent of their labor and self-sufficiency. The division of labor relates to how much they can satisfy the needs of their communities—as they want it. From this perspective one can categorize their level of developments as “high” or “low.” Second, if the level of development is high, then such diasporas will have more access and influence within their Country of Migration (COM). If the diaspora cannot exercise any influence in the COM, this represents a low development of the diaspora itself. Third, if their level of development is high diasporas can also attract the attention of the governments of their Country of Origins (COO). Therefore they become helpful in achieving the agenda of their COO.

According to the above criteria of diaspora developments, the Indian diaspora which had begun to migrate from India after 1947 to Britain did not at first bring about real achievements. The situation changed during the 1980s. There was a reason for this. The Indian diaspora was comprised mainly of villages and individuals working as laborers in industrial factories and other low-paid areas of employment. During the 1970s, Indians also arrived from the former African colonies of Britain. They were not poverty-ridden but well-educated, middle-class Hindu (as well as Muslim and Sikh) professionals and businessmen from Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya, and Malawi. They were second-generation migrants—the first generation having migrated from India to Africa. They had worked with the British colonial authorities, and established their trustworthiness with them but had not identified with the African population at all. During the post-independence period, the Africanization policies of the new African states resented the Indian presence because of their high levels of economic development and the social distance which existed between the two groups.

The Indian population in Britain, according to the statistics of 1999–2000, is more than 942,000. Approximately 40 percent of the population lives around London. Other segments of the population are settled in the East Midlands and Manchester. The predominant group of the second migration were mainly Hindu Gujaratis who settled in the urban areas of Britain “particularly in Leicester and north London. They came as whole family units, often sending a single member first to establish a base and make links with extended family members already in

residence. Once settled they began to reproduce organizations and practices familiar to them from their time in Africa.”⁵

The second migration brought a “major change in the development of Hinduism in Britain” along with “experience and skills relevant to community development and the formation of religious institutions.”⁶ This led to the establishment of many Hindu temples, community organizations, and charitable trusts to safeguard their religion and culture. Many of these organizations, like the Confederation of Gujarati Organizations, Maharashtra Manda, Punjabi Unity Forum, and the Hindu Cultural Society were generally known as community organizations. However, the Indian migrants should not be considered a monolithic community as there were many “divergent trends” among them.⁷ Their different histories of migration and different ethnicities separated them even within their settlement in Britain. For example, a “number of Hindus of Gujarati origins were settled in the area Balham and Tooting, a significant number of Hindu Punjabis were settled in Southall. . . . Each one had a different history. Furthermore, among the Gujaratis in Balham, “community” refers to a linguistic commonality among those in that geographic area. For the Punjabis in Southall, linguistic commonality combines with residential concentration and shared religious activities so that community is truly evident socially and geographically.”⁸ But it must be said that whatever their differences, they did have one thing in common: they were proud of their COO—India.

As time progressed, and as their economic conditions improved, their social networks expanded. They were quick to learn how to use the resources of the public service facilities such as town halls and other public premises for their festivals.⁹ While some of these organizations were opened privately by various groups, the Indian High Commission also supported the spread of Indian culture in Britain by opening the Nehru Centre. The center provided a venue for talks, exhibitions, cultural evenings and a number of other activities to created to raise the image and awareness of India. On an individual level the achievements of the Indians themselves are commendable. In Britain there were approximately thirty Indian professors in various universities engaged in disciplines such as computer science, engineering, biochemistry, aerospace, and numerous medical doctors and nurses.

Unlocking Closed Cultures

British culture was closed to the non-British. This may seem surprising for its policies for accepting large numbers of migrants, issuing them passports and citizenship—unlike other European countries—were indicative cultural intergration. This was an open policy for economic reasons but this did not mean that Britain had opened up its culture to migrants. Conversely, the migrants had come for economic reasons and not to change their culture. The reason why British culture was closed was a legacy of the colonial syndrome. By the 1960s, when decolonization began—not all British people endorsed colonialism—the colonial syn-

drome remained part of British culture because many still considered earlier British colonial history as a great achievement. The colonial syndrome continued to manifest itself within the British societal context in two ways: firstly, through the politics of exclusion relating to racism; and secondly through the politics of closure relating to the identity of “Britishness.”

The politics of exclusion emanated from colonialism. Many justified the colonial period with the rationalization of the “white man’s burden,” that the British had acquired colonies in order to bring civilization to them. The assumption was that the people of such cultures were inferior and did not possess any civilization, thus Britain was showing favor by imposing its rule. This led to the creation of a white/black dichotomy within British society and obviously created a system of exclusion of non-whites through racial discrimination. Racism had not been eradicated from British society before the 1960s because decolonization had not taken place. Racism in British society operated at the individual, institutional, and structural levels. Indians and other migrants groups suffered discrimination, in spite of the Race Relations Acts and other regulations trying to enforce equal opportunities. British governments have seemed to lack a strong political will to eradicate racism, and the racist card—in particular, stopping immigration—always featured to a greater or lesser extent as an issue of national elections.

The politics of closure, on the other hand, raised another issue: what is “Britishness?” Could the Indian migrant community become part of “Britishness?” This was a much more complex problem of the British context than racism. There was no doubt that the English, Scottish, Welsh and Irish were part of Britishness but what about the South Asians, Chinese, Africans, African Caribbeans, Somalis, and the like? This issue bothered some segments of British society. Technically, one was British by possessing a British passport. The question was whether one was British through the acquisition of the common culture of “Britishness.”

Intellectual arguments between the liberal and conservative schools of British nationalism could not find a solution. Parekh contrasted the two schools of nationalisms prevalent in Britain: conservative and liberal nationalists. Conservative nationalists related to territory, common language, culture, blood ties and history. They regarded “the integrity of the nation as the highest political value” and felt “deeply uneasy about the presence of outsiders.”¹⁰

Socialists and liberals, on the other hand, argued like the conservatives, that unity of the nation was prime objective and yet citizens cannot be united only by the laws, obligations, rights and duties imposed by the state. Citizens should be united on a “strong sense of national identity” which could be related to history and common tradition. This kind of liberalism made room for ethnic minorities in national identity by allowing them the right to their cultures, while stipulating that “immigrants should acquire “those traits that make up national character” or at least the “essential elements of national character.” Since for Miller, “national

character” includes a shared view of the past, tastes, sensibilities and so on, it must be taken to mean that immigrants should be required to acquire these” and that ““immigrants’ must abandon values and ways of behaving that are in stark conflict with those of the community as a whole.”¹¹

The tragedy was that such schools of thought were part of the politics of closure in which migrants were offered little or no choice. British culture was confused and did not know how to accommodate the South Asians; it was contradictory. The strategy advocated by the liberals was to take the assimilationist approach. They thought society could become the “melting pot” in which their majority would dominate and exert pressure on the Hindus to become assimilated into their culture. Realizing the failure of the assimilation theories, the policymakers began to accommodate them through a new theory, the “salad bowl” approach. This implied that every “vegetable” or “salad ingredient” could maintain its own identity. British society was soon labeled a multicultural society. Multiculturalism was a way of living in accordance with one’s own culture amidst other cultures. One culture did not need to have any linkage with any other culture. This policy has now been considered to have backfired, for serious questions have been raised as to the loyalties of the migrant British groups. Most of the groups have sought their identities within their religions and/or their countries of origin.

Extending Diaspora Spaces

The failure of the British government to purge the colonial syndrome left many migrants in a dilemma. They held British passports and enjoyed a number of benefits including voting rights, and other privileges, but they had a problem relating to the country of adoption. Since they could not consider themselves truly British without “Britishness”, how could they redefine themselves? The impact of the colonial syndrome should not be underrated. It disillusioned the younger generation who were British-born and those searching for new identities. Their identities changed from being migrant to becoming a diaspora.

Many studies have loosely used the term diaspora to label each and every migrant group. However, the term does have specific connotation in relation to the Jews. For the Jews, the term diaspora applied to the period of their dispersal resulting from the persecution by the Romans after the second destruction of their temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE. They rooted their identities into their religion and followed their religious culture wherever they were settled. Being Jewish gave them an identity and focused their minds on the land of Israel that they had lost. Migrant groups may often want to integrate or assimilate into the COM. The diaspora group, on the other hand, may make them integrated but their concern will always be with the COO. The Indians also strongly identified with India. For the Jews, Israel was their sacred land mentioned in the Bible while for the Indians, Bharat was the land of their gods and goddesses.

There is no doubt that diasporas are deterritorialized and transnational but Ver-tovec, in his study of the Indian migrant group, made the observation that migrants can develop what he labeled as “diaspora consciousness.”¹² Diaspora consciousness is “a particular kind of awareness said to be generated among contemporary trans-national communities. . . . Its particularity is described as being marked by various dimensions of dual or paradoxical nature. This nature is constituted negatively by experiences of discrimination and exclusion and positively by identification with a historical heritage (such as Indian civilization).”¹³

This diaspora-consciousness produced the Diaspora Consciousness Indian Migrants (DCIM), who acted as ambassadors and agents of their countries of origin. Those who had suffered from an identity crisis from the politics of exclusion and closure found refuge in their COO. The DCIMs projected the image of India and safeguarded the younger generation’s identity, rooting it in Indian culture. The older generation had been concerned about the identities of the younger generation. The first step they took to safeguard these identities was the establishment of Hindu temples and many other organizations which began mushrooming all over Britain. Knott observed that the younger generation, with little or no links with India, still had “an awareness of some aspects of their families’ religious practices and participation in festivals and a knowledge of stories about Krishna, Rama, Ganesh and the goddesses.”¹⁴

Britain as we have explained, was a closed culture. There had to be a strategy for how to penetrate it—this was done through Indian culture. The more skillfully the cultural instrument was used, the more the Indian community made inroads into a closed society and the result was that the culture and image of India was increasingly appreciated. The more their culture was experienced by the original indigenous British, the more it raised the image of India.

Indian culture penetrated British society in a number of ways. First, the many temples that were built in Britain opened their doors to the British public—unlike the mosques. The temple had an office staff which made it easy for anyone to contact them for arranging visits from school children and other organizations. Second, the festivals of Hinduism celebrated by the temples were open to anyone. Some of the festivals like Diwali were celebrated in such a public manner that the British living near it could not have avoided participation. In many cases civic dignitaries were invited to partake in such festivals. Diwali was also celebrated in the House of Commons with many members of the Indian community present there.

Third, the most effective way of cultural penetration was through the development of food consuming markets in Britain. It also particularly appealed to many vegetarians and vegans within British culture. Thousands of Indian restaurants had popularized Indian foods all over Britain. This proved to be an effective cultural instrument for India in a way that no other South Asian country such as Pakistan, Sri Lanka, or Nepal seemed to have developed. Indian cultural hege-

mony asserted control over all other South Asian foods. For example, thousands of years of Muslim rule in India left its impact on South Asian food, and dishes such as Mughalai Kormas, Biryanis, Pillaus, Kebabs, and Koftans were once meat-oriented with Turkish, Afghan, and Iranian derivation.

Fourth, the Indian world of fashion penetrated British culture as well. Not only did some British women wear saris, dupattas, and shalwar khamis, but some of the younger generation had pierced their noses so as to wear nats (nose rings) or tried Henna decorations on their hands.

Fifth, Indian films had created a version of Bollywood in Britain. Not only have many of their scenes been filmed in British locations but some British stars have wanted to act in Bollywood films. The headquarters of Bollywood was at Leicester and many Indian stars have visited the city. There were also many theatre companies projecting Indian themes. Some of the prominent names were Tara Arts, South Asian Arts, Akademi, South Asian Diaspora Literature and Arts Archive, Hungama Productions, Priya Pawar, Kali Theatre Company, Vaya Naidu and Company, South Asian Dance Alliance, and Surdhwani.

Sixth, classical Indian music has had a lot of influence in Britain. Great musical artists like Ravi Shankar, the best sitar player in India, have made their mark on British culture. A Pakistani Qawal led by the lead singer Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan grew popular in Britain before his premature death. The Punjabi dance Bhangra and its music had become very popular in Britain. Also the younger generation of British-born musical stars have made recordings of songs integrating Western and Indian music. Some of these productions had a profound impact on artists in Britain: Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber produced a stage musical called *Bombay Dreams* (2002).¹⁵

Seventh, most of the above aspects of culture had made successful penetrations into the closed culture. They received strong support from radio and TV stations operating from the major cities in Britain. Furthermore, linkages have been made by Indians with national radio and TV stations like the BBC to project Asian music through their radio stations. Hindu businessmen have established their own MATV station operating from Leicester. It not only projected Indian movies everyday but all kinds of social, political, and cultural programs imported from India. There were approximately eleven radio and TV stations which operated under various names like Sunrise Radio, Zee TV, Asia 1 TV, MATV, Sabras Radio, Radio XL, Apna TV, and Namaste TV. All of the stations project Indian songs, Indian news, and other aspects of Indian culture. There are also a number of ethnic publications which are popularly read among the migrant Indians like *India Weekly*, *Gurajat Samachar*, *Garavi Gujrat*, *India Home and Abroad*, *Amar Deep*, *Southall Gazette*, and *Asian Affairs*.

While these aspects strongly reinforced Indian culture, some talented British-Indians made their mark on British national programs. Their programs engaged not only British celebrities but also British audiences. For example, *The Kumars at*

No. 42 has been a very popular entertainment program. Many talented Indian stars became well known in Britain. According to one report, “a growing number of British actors are flying to Bollywood instead of Hollywood as Indian directors try to woo audiences with crossover-films that appeal to international markets. Over the next few months, four films made by prominent directors will be released with British stars . . . the trend has been reinforced by the success of Gurinder Chadha’s *Bend it like Beckham*, Nira Nair’s *Monsoon Wedding*, and Ashutosh Gowariker’s *Lagaan*, nominated for a best foreign film Oscar in 2002.”¹⁶ Bollywood also made films by borrowing British traditions and twisting them skillfully into its own successes. For example, the celebrated early nineteenth-century English novelist Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* was transformed by Gurinder Chadha, an Indian filmmaker, into *Bride and Prejudice* (2004) in order to attract British audiences. Well-reviewed and well-received or not, there was no doubt that such cross-over cultural activities mark a considerable achievement in piercing the British market. Stars like Amitabh Bachchan, Shabani Azmi, and Gulshan Grover pulled large crowds and boosted not only the image of Bollywood, but also India. Some filmmakers made nostalgic films of Indo-British colonial and decolonization experiences, most famously Richard Attenborough’s *Gandhi* (1982).¹⁷ There were many Indian groups who promoted yoga and Indian dance in Britain. One major group was Bharatya Vidya Bhavan, whose purpose was to encourage and propagate the understanding of Indian art and culture. Its objective was to become a center of learning in the United Kingdom for Indian culture. It trained teachers on the subject and helped Indian artists to visit various centers in Britain. The group staged dramas, in both the Indian and English languages, and performed classical Indian dances. The global presence of Indians was acclaimed by some academics as a process of “ongoing and developing civilization” for “culture is seen as the motor of civilization.”¹⁸

It is one thing to create cultural spaces within a closed society—it is another to extend it into other levels. To maintain it one had to play the rules of the British game which meant laying the foundations of cultural space within British culture. This could only be done if economic space was also created. Britain was a capitalist society and the stronger the economics of the community the greater the influence it could wield. The second migration had changed by becoming well educated.

The second migration was comprised of two categories—businessmen or professionals. Having settled in Britain they had created economic spaces. In general the Indian diaspora could be divided into three categories. To start from the third tier which was the lowest level, the majority were retail traders comprising shop owners who operated on a small scale, owning corner shops, grocery stores, Indian sweets shops, and the like. On the second tier, there were a number of businessmen who had created a strong middle class. They owned jewelry shops, fashion shops, Indian restaurants, and travel agencies, for example. On the top level, that is, the first tier, there were multi-millionaires. Some were steel magnates like Lakshmi Mittal,

in oil, banking and telecommunications like the Hinduja brothers, Shrichand and Gopichand. Others like Lord Paul were in the Caparo Group, in the hotel business like Jasminder Singh, the brewery business like Manubhai Madhvani, or in electronics like Gulu Lalvani. Some of these millionaires were as young as twenty-one years old, as was the case of Reuben Singh. Altogether, approximately four hundred fifty major South Asian businessmen existed in Britain. Among the Chambers of Commerce and Industry which existed in almost every major British city, there were Asian chapters in which the majority were Indian businessmen. The economic spaces they had established were used to create cultural and political spaces. One separate category, also part of the Indian diaspora but not included in the business sector, were the professionals: doctors, dentists, accountants, lawyers, engineers, academics, and the like. Each had a professional body which the Indians might seek to influence, while academics exerted influence within their university institutions.

Although these categories operated from Britain, many of them had business connections with India. Indian businessmen from India too had made their connections with Britain. Approximately one hundred twenty-five companies had opened their offices in London and were investing in the United Kingdom and doing a flourishing trade. Some of the company organizations considered important were the Indian Development Group (UK), Indian Development Fund, Confederation of Indian organizations, India Group, and Indian Forum.

According to Chandrashekhkar Bhat, the Indian elite attracted the attention of the Indian government during the 1970s for Indian development programs. They were labeled as Non-Resident Indians (NRIs). To attract their money, financial schemes were set up, like the Resurgent India Bonds which “tapped \$4.2 billion in 1998.”¹⁹ During the 1990s, the migrant Indian community in Britain was mobilized in a number of ways that created rich dividends for India. According to the latest report, in 2003, the British-Indian community sent £10 billion to India.²⁰ This was a significant amount, indicating a number of facts about the Indian community in Britain. First, the community in general was more affluent than any other immigrant community. Second, they were seriously interested in the development of their country and sent such large amounts of money to India. As some of the members of the Indian migrant community became more affluent, the Indian government began to take a serious interest in them as they could be used to serve the economic interests of the Indian government. They were labeled NRIs and “were encouraged to invest in India through certain attractive schemes as much as they were welcomed to launch industrial enterprises along with the transfer of technology.”²¹ But the Non-Resident Indians were in reality a selective category of “middle-class elite families” who comprised “highly skilled groups of professionals, scientists, doctors and engineers.”²²

Later the Indian government must have reconsidered the scheme as overly selective and concluded that it had to be expanded. This kind of interest by the Indian government in its overseas Indian migrants increased and in 1999 a mass-

scale mobilization, known as the People of Indian Origin (PIO), took place. A PIO Card was created by the Ministry of Home Affairs in March 1999 “to reinforce the emotional bonds of Indians who have made other countries their homes, but who now have a yearning to renew their ties with the land of their origin. Persons of Indian origin up to the fourth generation settled anywhere in the world” were all able to register as PIOs.²³ Furthermore, PIO Card holders were given many facilities in India to buy and dispose of immovable properties and obtain admission for their children in schools. They were also given concessions that they would not require visas to go to India if their stay did not exceed more than one hundred eighty days. It is estimated that the NRI population is about 6.7 million and the PIOs around 15 million worldwide.²⁴ The Indian government was expecting to get them all to register for the PIO Card which would open various facilities for them.

The ambitions of the Indian companies were not merely to sell their products or services but to capture the global market and to leave India’s mark as a global power in economic terms. One report commented that “India’s top companies are already building a niche in global markets, selling high-tech products and services at keen prices. Helped by a highly skilled but modestly paid workforce, India’s engineering, pharmaceutical and technology firms are giving rivals such as IBM a run for their money on their home turf . . . business to business is where India is already making waves, in particular in software services” where companies like West India Produce (WIPRO) have become a major competitor with U.S. companies like General Electric, Cisco systems and Alcatel. Another company is Infosys, which even exports India’s software and its clients have included Boeing, Cisco Systems, Dell, Toshiba, and Visa International. A third company, Tata Consultancy Services, a branch of the Tata group, has also made their presence felt in Europe, and pharmaceutical companies like Ranbaxy Laboratories are producing drugs and selling them at reduced prices.²⁵

Some Indian companies—recognizing the affluence of the Indian migrants—began to target them. One of the largest Indian companies, owned by Subrata Roy, is Sahara India Parivar. It is in the limelight not only because it owns TV stations, a bank, an airline, real estate and employs seven hundred thousand people, but because it has top film stars on its books which attracts attention. This company is planning to market “hoopla and showbiz that will be the key to selling Sahara to expat Indians . . . it is all good publicity for the Sahara development’s satellite towns, shopping malls and gated luxury leisure complexes catering to India’s burgeoning middle-class.”²⁶

The growing middle-classes in India had become a significant factor attracting the attention of political parties. The growth of the Indian middle-classes has been strengthened by the return of some of the Indian migrants. Where once there was a “brain drain” from India, in contemporary times there is a “brain gain” with Indians heading back to their homeland. According to one report, “an

entire generation of Indians saw the West as the land of opportunity. They left their homeland in their thousands and transformed themselves from poor economic migrants to successful businessmen and professionals. But India's booming economy and promises of an affluent lifestyle are drawing increasing numbers of Indians living in America and Britain back to their roots. The reverse migration that began as a trickle in the late 1990s is now large enough to suggest a 'brain gain' for India. . . . There are an estimated thirty-five thousand returned non-resident Indians living in the city of Bangalore alone. Attracted by a booming economy, Indians who have amassed professional experience and savings from their years in the West, can afford a luxury lifestyle when they return to their cultural roots."²⁷

This kind of brain gain has not happened in other neighboring countries in South Asia, where there are only brain drains. According to the Economic Councillor of the Indian High Commission in London, "the trend seems to affect the more non-Westernized first generation in this country, the ones who came here at a point in their life for higher education or as executives, they settle down for a while and then they return. It is not as relevant to the second and third generation or truly westernized Indians. This group has far too many links here in Britain to find it attractive enough to move. . . . I am aware of some people who have gone back. It has either been for better career opportunities or the pursuit of an entrepreneurial venture after making some money here. Some have ventured on to business opportunities in India but have not necessarily moved lock, stock and barrel. There are also people from here who have gone and invested in outsourcing industries in India. There are certainly more and more people including British-based Indians who are venturing into businesses there. Just because some are choosing to make the most of opportunities in India does not mean there are any less here. Lots of Indians can hold decent jobs here. It is a lifestyle and business issue. As a top-notch executive, the salary level available in India now promises a better lifestyle than here in Britain."²⁸ The effect of this brain gain has been that India's middle classes have become stronger. Indians are not returning for religious reasons, but for economic, social, and cultural reasons. It makes them feel more at home than living in Britain. The DCIMs have done an excellent job in creating cultural and economic spaces for themselves within the British context.

The predominant strategy used was to make political contacts and cultivate them carefully: this led to the creation of political spaces for themselves and the COO. Within the British political context, this was necessary because it could change the image of India and facilitate trade and other Indian national interests in Britain. This strategy was undertaken with two agendas in mind. One was the realization that having influence and lobbies in the COM could facilitate one's economic projects. The other was that it was prompted by Indian Embassy officials whose task was to spread the influence of India through networking. This task could be achieved by the Indian diaspora, some of whose members were businessmen and local city

counselors who were in touch with local MPs because of their political party affiliations. It could also be one of the tasks of community leaders.

But the story of the younger generation was different. The political awareness of the younger generation of South Asian migrants in general increased in Britain. There were reasons why this level of political awareness rose. One important reason was because the “presence of National Front and other anti-immigrant candidates in elections has increased their awareness of the political issues, and contributed towards an increasing degree of political mobilization and, indeed, participation in elections in order to counter the anti-immigrant propaganda. This is also the response of the major political parties. These parties have not only felt the need to take steps to involve Asians in their activities and campaigns but have openly sought their votes in various elections [since] 1974.”²⁹ Apart from awareness among the Indian younger generation, the most practical way of becoming influential that was often used by Indian businessmen was by making large donations to political parties. Lakshmi Mittal had donated two million pounds to the Labor party. Previously he had donated £125,000. According to White “when the first gift was revealed a year later it was linked to the fact that Tony Blair had written to the prime minister of Romania shortly afterwards, backing Mittal’s efforts to take over a steel plant in that country.”³⁰ This was a powerful way of wielding political influence in British politics.

Growing political awareness had different effects on the diaspora groups in Britain. Among the Indian migrants, the importance of obtaining political influence was not considered to be a job of the Embassy of India only. The DCIM worked effectively to benefit their country of origin by creating a positive image of India. Such images influenced the opinions of employers and opened the doors of the job market for non-Muslim Indians rather than Muslims who from the 1990s were feared as potential terrorists. Politically, the Indians established themselves within the main political parties at both a local and national level. Within the local city councils there were approximately two hundred fifty to three hundred counselors elected from various political parties, leading them to form a British Indian Counselors Association. Many British cities also had from time to time a Lord Mayor of Indian origins. Most of the counselors were at first drawn to the Labor Party but subsequently their presence was noticeable in both the Conservative and Liberal Democratic parties. Some of the political parties were dependent on their constituencies for Indian votes. Such Members of Parliament were strong supporters of the Indians in Britain. Two political parties (Labour and the Liberal Democrats) formed a Friends of India parliamentary group. Apart from these friends there was also a British Indian Parliamentary Association which transcended party lines and met regularly to discuss India’s concerns and was known as the Curry Club.

Approximately four Indians were members of the British House of Commons. There were eleven members of the House of Lords, some of them were very promi-

ment like Lord Parekh and Lord Dholakia. The latter was the first Indian to have become the Chairman of the Liberal Democrat Party. With such an impressive presence in British politics, it is not surprising that the lobby for India was strong and could be used to help the political, economic, and security interests of India. Some Members of the House of Lords such as Lord Swaraj Paul headed the Indo-British Round Table which was a pro-India lobby group working closely with the Indian High Commission and taking care of the interests of India. Other Indians occupied very important positions in all three British national political parties.

One must wonder that while all these chasms were created, had the Indian diaspora launched some conspiratorial plan? There was no such plan. The reason why the Indian diaspora progressed was because it had a diaspora philosophy, which had two aspects. First, the Indians were proud of their culture and were ready to spread it anywhere. Second, the Indians had a strong identity as Indians. This emerged from their COO. The great majority have strong nationalistic feelings for their country and its culture. Even if some Indians were secular, their identities were well rooted in their COO. Equipped with their diaspora philosophy, then, it was not a problem to construct cultural, economic, and political spaces in the COM. Although their COM was a closed society, the Indian strategy was to penetrate it through culture, which they did.

There were two other factors which facilitated this success. India had a very positive view of its diaspora and the Indian embassy and its diplomats were always available to give the diaspora direction. The Indian government had realized the role their migrants could play for India. The Indian embassy had close relations with the leaders of the diaspora in Britain. Prime Minister Nehru was interested in overseas Indians, but his vision and advice for the diaspora was clear: they should be “the best citizens of the country of their adoption.”³¹ This did not imply that they should become westernized and forget their Indian identity. On the contrary, he wanted them to be ambassadors of India by being the best Indian nationalists. As the diaspora developed economically, later Indian governments were more concerned with the amount of money that the Indian diasporas could remit home to facilitate economic development. Both these perspectives were common to other South Asian states as well. The Indian diaspora had made its impact on British society as stated above through the creation of the gaps within it. But the second reason for its success was that the British government knew that India had a population that by the turn of the millennium would exceed one billion people. For the British, India was a huge consumer market for selling their goods. Trade relations between the two countries accordingly were very strong.

Politics of Indian Identities

The strategy of the Indian diaspora for building cultural, economic, and political gaps within British society had been effective. It had not only successfully

penetrated British society but had also created a positive image of India. But under the surface there were problems. These problems had always been there and had emanated from caste divisions rather than sectarianism or secularism. Since the love for India was stronger, it had held them together as Indians. But the problem rose to the surface in India when there was a clash between the political parties and their ideologies. The congress had a secular ideology considering every citizen as Indian. But the BJP party had a fundamentalist Hindu ideology. The Hindu fundamentalist movement had become powerful during the 1990s and begun to spread its influence in Indian politics. It opposed secular India and secular Hindus accusing its supporters of making political capital out of the religion. The BJP started redefining who was a Hindu through the ideology of *Hindutva* and tried to change the nature of Indian society.

The *Sangh Parivar*, the umbrella organization for Hindu fundamentalism, also realized the importance of the Indian diaspora and sought to benefit from it. When its political party, the BJP, came to power in 1988 as part of a governing alliance, the perspective of the Indian government changed. It recognized the importance of the financial strength of the diaspora and wanted to use it for party political funding purposes. It began to extend its tentacles into the British-Indian diaspora.

To achieve this end, in September 2000 the Indian government set up a Committee on the Indian Diaspora (CID) which was headed by a BJP member of Parliament, L. M. Singhvi.³² He had been a very successful high commissioner to Britain and also held the rank of a cabinet minister. The CID was expected to explore both the NRIs and PIOs in terms of their “aspirations, attitudes, requirements, strengths and weaknesses” and “expectations from India.”³³

Apart from the above mentioned objectives, it would be naïve to think that there was no hidden agenda. The real purpose of the CID was to explore the possibility of mobilizing the migrant diaspora into serving the purposes of the *Sangh Parivar*. The BJP-led government was perhaps the first government of India to take seriously the task of changing and mobilizing the attitude of Indian migrants. One aspect of the agenda was the conversion of vulnerable targets from Diaspora Conscious Indian Migrants (DCIM) to Diaspora Conscious Hindu Migrants (DCHM), which was linked to the BJP’s domestic policy of cultural homogenization.

The ideology of *Hindutva* was alien to Hinduism. It was a political fascist ideology which had no roots within traditional Hinduism. The thinker who articulated this brand of Hindu fundamentalism was V. D. Savakar (1883–1966), who in 1923 published a book titled *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* Savarkar conjoined the Hindu nation on the basis of being part of the Aryan race. To him, the “Hindu identity was formed by the commingling of the blood of the Aryans with the people they encountered.”³⁴

Fascist-oriented Hindus like K. B. Hedgewar who founded the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS) in 1925 had read Savakar’s book and the two planned the formation of a Hitler Youth cadre. RSS recruits dressed with khaki shorts and white shirts and became the contingent of Hanuman with a saffron colored flag.

In 1940, M. S. Golwalkar took over from Hedgewar. He authored a book titled *We, Our Nation Defined* in 1931 and wrote that “the foreign races in Hindustan must either adopt the Hindu culture and language, must learn to respect and hold in reverence Hindu religion, must entertain no idea but those of the glorification of the Hindu race and culture of the Hindu nation and must lose their separate existence to merge in the Hindu race, or may stay in the country, wholly subordinate to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment—not even citizen’s rights.”³⁵

As the RSS developed and expanded, it absorbed a number of other organizations which came to be known as Sangh Parivar (family of right-wing organizations). S. P. Mookerjee founded the Bharatiya Jana Sangh in 1951, which changed its name to Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 1979. But the BJP strongly supported the fundamentalist Hindu nationalism and became the political face of the Sangh Parivar. Another organization was established in 1966 named the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) and started to counter the spread of secularism in India. It considered that all other homegrown faiths like Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism were part of the banyan tree, which implied that they were all Hindu in origin.

The Hindu caste system comprised four castes: the Brahmins were the priestly caste and desired to hold all the power among themselves. The other three castes were the Kshatriyas (the administrative caste), the Vaisyas (the tillers of the soil) and the Sudras (the untouchables), who did not enjoy the same status as the Brahmins. It is not surprising to note that “most scholars . . . agree that this religion is notoriously difficult to define . . . what the word Hinduism stands for, in essence, is Brahmanism. This becomes clear when once we strip it of its multiple layers of accumulated accretions from within the larger Indian tradition.”³⁶

But while Hinduism may be tolerant, Brahmanism was never tolerant. The founders of Hindutva ideology were Brahmins. According to Robinson, Hindutva had two forms because it “splits itself into a project of violent retribution and a project of cultural affirmation . . . the two strands intertwine in schemes to destroy the Muslim or Christian monuments and to unearth or rebuild temple structures that really or allegedly lie beneath. But, for the most part, the projects can exist side by side without most people understanding the insidious and dangerous linkages between them.”³⁷ Lele considered these two aspects of Hindutva as “two faces of Brahmanism. Together they constitute the two basic features . . . consent as benign face and coercion as the malignant one. These two faces of Brahmanism have always coexisted and continue to do so today within what we now call Hinduism. As to which one becomes more visible and when, it is determined by the context and the way in which active social agents respond to it. The instruments of dominance and power remain normally hidden behind an aura of legitimacy.”³⁸ Lele’s argument is correct, and he further reinforces it by writing that “the Sangh Parivar must stage frequent spectacular and symbolic acts such as *rathayatras*, *yagnas*, mosque demolitions, temple constructions and anti-minority riots in order

to keep that attention deflected . . . what is being affirmed in the name of Hinduism, as their cultural heritage, by those outside India, is a complex and confused web of practices and beliefs whose relevance can only make sense through a thorough exploration of the context in which this new awakening has occurred.”³⁹

As stated earlier, the Sangh Parivar and its various branches had realized the strategic importance of the diaspora in Britain long before the BJP came to power. They had a very peculiar mandate: to transform Indian identities into Hindu identities among those who belonged to Hinduism. The first strategy was to project “cultural and national affirmation encapsulated in various elements” so as to attract “a large section of the middle class Hindu residents within and outside India.”⁴⁰ For the DCIMs of the Hindu faith there was no conflict in working in Britain because *janam bhumi* (birth place), *karma bhumi* (place of work), and *matru bhumi* (ancestral land) did not conflict with each other.⁴¹ There was no problem with this identity.

The problem arose when Hindutva asserted “the primacy and priority of Hindu identity within and outside India. It would be myopic to view such identity merely as an expression of primordial affinity. Rather it entails a creation of a wholly new social and political identity using religious community as its base and employing a new religious discourse and practice through a network of newly created organizations.”⁴² In this definition, then, the DCIMs with their new Hindutva identity became its new adherents in Britain.

Yet, the Indian diaspora, as stated earlier, was not monolithic, but divided into various sects in religious terms, and class in economic terms. The Sangh Parivar had to transcend these barriers. According to Bhatt and Mukta, “the strength of the Hindutva movement lies in its ability to draw in large numbers of people who are not upper caste or middle-class both in India and the diaspora. While members of the Indian upper castes and emergent middle-classes have undoubtedly provided the intellectual leadership of the Hindutva movement, both within India and outside, there are important signs of previously stigmatized groups rising in social status through the espousal of Hindutva ideology. In India, for example, very poor migrant workers have been implicated in violence against Muslim communities. In Britain, there is evidence that working-class individuals from a traditional leather-working community in Leeds became leading members of the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh.”⁴³

The Sangh Parivar wanted expatriate Hindus to “constitute a source of power not just to India but also to the Hindu nation. They were the spokesman for Hindu India abroad and partners in the country’s efforts to become a major player. BJP mouth-piece *The Organiser* (January 21, 2001) quoted the Indian prime minister as saying “we do not merely seek investment from Hindu organizations and asset transfer. What we seek is a broader relationship, a partnership, a partnership among all children of mother India.” BJP election manifestoes have often stressed the importance of NRIs and accorded high priority to the protection of their interests.⁴⁴

As stated earlier, most of the temples and other Hindu organizations in Britain were opened with the support of the Hindu working-classes and from the Gujarati community. But when the Sangh Parivar approached them, the first in undertaking this new Hindutva identity were the Hindu Gujaratis, particularly from East Africa. According to Tikekar, the “predominance of the East African Gujaratis among the British Hindus has been also an important factor in this process. They acquired a sense of a ‘superior race’ as they constituted an intermediate class under the British rule in East Africa. They regard Gujarat as the most modern and dynamic part of India. All this leads to an extreme defensiveness about events in Gujarat and the rise of fascism, so that criticizing the VHP is seen as tantamount to criticizing Gujaratis. They came to Britain fortified with their experience of organizing Bharatiya Swayansevak Sangh (BSS)—the African incarnation of RSS.”⁴⁵

They were strong in their support of HSS and VHP in Britain and had almost sixty *shakas* (branches) all over Britain. They produced a publication, *Sangh Sandeesh*, which reported many activities of the Hindus in Britain, as well as other news of interest. They had another organization by the name of Virat Hindu Sammelan, which opened in 1989 and was sponsored by the HSS and VHP, and had connections with three hundred other organizations. The message of the Sammelan “was predominantly of all Hindu unity, an attempt to transcend internal differences and the construction of a unifying and global platform for for Hindus. It provided an opportunity to bring together different political strands in support of the newly invented ritual of *shilanyas* in India. It is interesting to note that the Sammelan received support from the British MPs of all political persuasions—and complimentary messages right from Buckingham Palace and ten Downing Street and officials from the British establishment.”⁴⁶ From this one can deduce the high level of networking of the HSS and the VHP in Britain.

The VHP (UK) claimed to represent the entire Hindu population in Britain. There was a reason for this. British multicultural society offered it the freedom to do so, and it could penetrate other European countries freely. It held its fifth European conference in Frankfurt and approximately twelve hundred delegates attended. It had an estimated forty branches in the region and produced its own publication known as *Vishwa Hindu*. In Britain it claimed to have contacts with five hundred fifty organizations and affiliations with some three hundred fifty organisations.”⁴⁷ This gave them not only credibility but also authority. This facilitated their secret agenda of transforming identities from Indian to Hindu.

The Reaction of the Diaspora

Diaspora activism in favor of conversion from Indians to Hindus, as well as opposition to this idea, was tremendous in Britain. If the BJP government had

divided the diaspora, those alienated did not accept it peacefully. It was their reactions which started bringing out the exposure of the BJP government and its Hindutva ideology and the violent massacres in Gujarat in 2002. Many secular Hindus who were supporters of the Congress Party also protested because they did not want to change their identities. It seems likely that those who had some kind of resentment against Muslims were more vulnerable to changing their identities. Also groups like Human Rights Watch and the Concerned Citizens' Tribunal produced powerful reports that were widely circulated in Britain. The overall effect of this was that the perfect image that had been built over the years began to become tarnished.

A Muslim organization, Awaaz: South Asia Watch Limited wrote a detailed report titled *In Bad Faith: British Charity and Hindu Extremism* which exposed how the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (UK), Vishwa Hindu Parishad (UK), and Kalyan Ashram Trust (UK) misused funds and United Kingdom to support Hindu extremism in India.⁴⁸ The challenge before the new Congress-led Indian government in 2004 was to reverse the change in the identity of the diaspora, returning from Hindu fundamentalism to Indian nationalism while uniting the diaspora. The diaspora had become divided as the Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, and Parsis had their own great civilizations in India and could not relate to India as the holy land of gods and goddesses. But they certainly could relate to it on the basis of nationalism. It is too early to predict how the new Congress-led government will handle these challenges. But during his recent visit to the United Kingdom, the Indian Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, made clear his views about the Indian diaspora.

He considered the diasporas of Britain a "bridge between their adopted land and India" and stated that "the country took 'pride in their achievements.'"⁴⁹ So the strategy was not to accuse any segment of the British diaspora of disloyalty to India. British Prime Minister Tony Blair also reinforced Manmohan's views by commenting that the 1.5 million people of Indian origin in Britain are "at the heart of our relationship" (that is, the relationship between Britain and India) for "their cultural values contribute significantly towards making Britain the vibrant, dynamic society that it is today. They are a vital bond between our two communities."⁵⁰ This will lessen, but not eradicate, the differences between the DCIMs and the DCHMs. The objective of the Indian prime minister's visit to Britain was to persuade the British prime minister to support India's attempt to become a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. This was agreed to by Tony Blair, who stated that "India is a country of 1.2 billion people. For India not be represented on the Security Council is, I think, something that is not in tune with the modern times in which we live."⁵¹ This ploy of Manmohan Singh also placed the responsibility on the shoulders of the Indian diaspora to lobby the British government to support India's desire strongly. No one from the diaspora would oppose this and the aim was to bring Indians, regardless of political or religious persuasion, together to achieve this goal.

Conclusion

The study of the Indian diaspora is very useful as a model for the development of diaspora studies as a subject. It can yield many useful lessons for studying other diasporas. This is not to say that the Indian diaspora is the perfect model. But despite certain flaws, it has been a model that other diasporas have had to follow to become a significant force in British life. There is no doubt that the diasporic development of Indians has a status value in Britain. They have earned this status through their own efforts and initiative to change the societal structure still infected with the colonial syndrome. The second migration was very helpful in achieving this. Any country with a diaspora that has earned the kind of status gained by expatriot Indians in Britain has to be proud of it.

NOTES

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12. Steven Vertovec, *The Indian Diaspora* (London: Routledge, 2003), 141.
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