

# The History of Indian Diaspora: Legacy of Colonisation and Role in Indian Freedom Struggle

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## ABSTRACT:

The Modi government has tried to explore the strength of Diaspora community with emotionally fuelled up events like 'Howdy Modi' in US. In his foreign trips and other public outreach activities, the Indian PM has actively engaged in persuading the Diaspora to contribute to India's growth. However, the focus of the current article is on tracing the historical roots of Indian Diaspora. This is done by elucidating upon the four patterns of migration which lead to the dispersing of the Indian Diaspora in different countries of the world. Apart from this, the piece of writing also highlights the role of the Indian Diaspora in the Indian Nationalist struggle which led to the further strengthening of the emotional ties with their homeland. This is done by describing their role in important historic events such as the Komagata Maru incident as well as the formation of Azad Hind Fauj which were quite instrumental in catalyzing the freedom struggle.

**KEYWORDS:** Indian Diaspora, migration, Ghadar Party, Komagata Maru, historical roots, freedom struggle

## Defining The Term 'Indian Diaspora':

Although the Government of India doesn't follow any specific definition of the term 'Indian Diaspora', it made an attempt to define it in 2004 as,

"A generic term used to describe the people who migrated from the territories which at present, lie within the borders of India."

In common parlance, the term is understood to include,

- Non-resident Indians (NRIs)
- Persons of Indian Origin (PIOs) and Overseas Citizens of India (OCIs) cardholders; which were merged into one category- OCI in 2015.

- Stateless Person of Indian Origin who have no documents to substantiate or prove their Indian origin.<sup>1</sup>

In a much broader sense, the Indian Diaspora includes within its fold all such groups of people whose roots could be traced to India and who are Indian citizens residing abroad on a temporary or permanent basis.<sup>2</sup>

## THE FOUR PATTERNS OF MIGRATION LEADING TO THE FORMATION OF INDIAN DIASPORA:

The spread of 'Indian Communities' in different parts of the world could be explained with the help of three migration patterns. Each of these currents has their own distinct backgrounds, conditions and characteristics that helped in reproducing Indian culture abroad.

### A) THE ELDEST MIGRATION FLOW:

The **eldest migration flow** happened when the traders in India and other Southeast Asian countries started to leave their homeland for finding more profitable ventures in trade and business and the Indian Coastal Community was one among them that focused on building ties with East Africa, Central Asia and East Africa. But one of the chief characteristics of this kind of migration or the so-called 'Trade Diplomacy' is its temporary nature because they eventually returned to their home place. These traders acted as the cultural links between their home country and the other country. Additionally, their exposure to other

<sup>1</sup>MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS, GOVERNMENT OF INDIA, <https://www.mea.gov.in/foreign-policy.htm> (Last Visited 6 October, 2021).

<sup>2</sup>SHREYA CHALLAGALA, The Diaspora and India's growth story, ORF ISSUE BRIEF; Issue no .232 (updated March 2018).

cultures helped them in developing a COSMOPOLITAN lifestyle.<sup>3</sup>

#### B) SECOND MIGRATION FLOW:

The **second current** started in the backdrop of colonial rule when indentured labor was coerced to work in British colonies or plantation sites. Slavery was abolished in 1834, 1846 and 1873 respectively in the British, French and Dutch colonies. This led to extreme shortage of labor in the plantation sites of these economies. Therefore, the Indian indentured labor served as a replacement to the freed slaves of the 19th Century plantation Economies. They were convinced or rather induced to leave India by making them believe that they were going to lead a secure life there. But these contracts were unethical and illegal at the same time as most Indians were unaware about their provisions. They were not even correctly told about the country where they were to be transported. Many workers died during the voyage itself. Owing to the inhumane conditions of work and maltreatment at the hands of the employers, mortality rates were high.

But this kind of migration was different from the first wave in the sense that **much of it was forced and not voluntary in nature**. In this manner, thousands of Indians got transported to distant shores such as Fiji, Surinam and Caribbean islands<sup>4</sup>. Contract laborers were also recruited to Malaysia, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, South Africa, Trinidad, Guyana and Tobago. Indian labor was recruited to:

- **French colonies** in Guadeloupe, Reunion islands and Martinique
- **Dutch colonies** in Surinam
- **Portuguese colonies** in Mozambique and Angola
- Also, the **British colonies** in East Africa for the construction of railways.

There were different ways in which Indian immigrants in different countries tried to develop cordial ties with other people, at the same time keeping their distinct identity preserved. The nature of interaction depended upon the place to which they were transported:

- The ones who were transported to nearby destinations (such as Burma and Sri Lanka) were deterred by the harsh impositions in these

countries and had very few chances to return even when their contract expired. Therefore, they settled in these foreign lands and started to raise their families.

- In order to remain closely connected to their motherland, the Indian immigrants in Malaya and Burma **married within their community**.
- But the situation was different in Mauritius and Caribbean as the Indian immigrants there intermarried with other ethnicities as well. Still they retained their cultural legacy providing them with a separate identity.<sup>5</sup>

Since the Indian Diaspora is not a homogenous community, therefore, their dialect or language mutated differently; and folk dances, rituals and songs were conducted in modified forms. During the same period, there were some Indians who migrated to serve the colonial governments overseas as clerks and teachers. These kinds of Indian Emigrants come into the category of Indians who helped in the expansion of the colonial system by collaborating with the British. On the whole, the first wave of Indian emigrants was largely composed of poor-debt-ridden landless peasants, working class, convicts and fugitives, etc. who were followed by teachers, clerks, priests, accountants, etc.<sup>6</sup>

#### C) THIRD PATTERN OF MIGRATION:

The **third current** takes into account various migrations that happened after the Second World War:

- First many Muslims migrated from India to East and West Pakistan<sup>7</sup>
- And the Hindus migrated from Pakistan to India

But Muslims in India and Hindus in Pakistan felt that they were neglected by the new governments and their minority rights were not protected. At the same time, many highly educated professionals were leaving India to find jobs as teachers, lawyers and doctors in the US, Canada and UK. There was a mass exodus of many IT professionals. To add on, many migrants had started to move towards the rich oil producing Muslim countries in the **Middle East** such as Kuwait, Qatar, UAE and Saudi Arabia

<sup>5</sup> INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS, Pushpesh Pant 313 (2020 Edition).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> MAURITIUS TIMES, <http://www.mauritiustimes.com/mt/karan-dev-8/> (Last Visited October 17, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> GLOBAL INDIAN DIASPORA: EXPLORING TRAJECTORIES OF MIGRATION AND THEORY, Gijbert Oonk, 11(2007 Edition).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

which were spending huge amounts of money to build infrastructure and paid lumsome salaries to maintain the luxurious lifestyle enjoyed by the ruling elite<sup>8</sup>. This was primarily due to the **oil boom of 1970's** in the gulf countries. But most of them were involved in jobs such as cooks, gardeners, domestic servants, construction workers and semi-skilled professionals such as electricians, drivers, and personal plumbers. The bulk of this labor force was constituted by people from Kerala and Andhra Pradesh.<sup>9</sup>

#### D) Fourth Pattern Of Migration:

It was within the post-war period that a **fourth pattern** also developed which was of the '**twice or thrice migrants**'. This included the migrants who left their host country for political and economic reasons. For example, Indians, mainly Gujaratis and Sindhis migrated from East Africa to US and UK; or the Indian indentured labor from Suriname who eventually came to settle in the Netherlands. Also, the US emerged to be an important centre for higher Education. And foreign legislations like the **Immigration Act of 1965** (US) and regulations introduced in Canada (1967) led to the huge migration of Indian professionals to these countries. Most of these never re-migrated to India. Although they might be feeling some cultural link with their home countries or 'MOTHERLAND' but the political, economic and family ties led them to some other country. This group of migrants was the most diverse and consisted of laborers, traders and professionals.<sup>10</sup>

#### ROLE OF INDIAN DIASPORA IN INDIAN FREEDOM STRUGGLE:

India's independence transformed the world but it was indeed given shape by the world. Rather, it was a global product as most of the archetypal nationalist leaders such as **Gandhi and Nehru** were a culmination of the experiences they had abroad. Even importantly, the principle organisation that led the freedom struggle, CONGRESS had made independence its objective under the influence of radical thoughts from beyond the subcontinent<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>8</sup>OONK, *supra note* 3, at 12.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup>PANT; *supra note* 4, at 314.

<sup>11</sup> THE TRIBUNE,  
<https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/archive/comment/global-roots-of-india-s-freedom-struggle-455377> (Last visited: October 6, 2021).

For instance, **LalaHardayal**, originally descending from Delhi, collided with the Indian Community in San Francisco and around 1913 led the foundation stone of the 'GHADAR PARTY'. The party played an instrumental role in distributing revolutionary news and poetry from different centres of the world such as Russia, Ireland, India, etc. The Ghadar movement also developed strong solidarity ties with Irish, Egyptian and other anti-colonial movements. They also acted as a link between the militant Diaspora intellectuals and the activists in the subcontinent. During the 1911 Chinese Revolution, the Ghadar movement was helped by the Indian Communities around the Pacific Rim to acquire money and arms.<sup>12</sup>

**LalaLajat Rai** was instrumental in strengthening the political and intellectual ties between the Punjab Diaspora and their original homeland i.e. Punjab during his visits to California in 1907 and 1916. Ghadar publicity about the infamous '**KomagataMaru**' incident fuelled the Punjabi Muslim soldiers of the Fifth Madras light infantry in **Singapore** to mutiny in 1915. The Indian radicals had set up global networks and remained determined despite suppression. With the support of the Ottoman and German empires, rebels like HarDayal, Raja Mahindra Pratap and others had set up a provisional government of India in Afghanistan for coordinating an upsurge or uprising within the subcontinent. The **1917 Bolshevik Revolution** further strengthened the resolve of these leaders.<sup>13</sup>

#### TWO MAJOR INCIDENTS:

##### A) KOMAGATA MARU INCIDENT AND ROLE OF GHADAR PARTY (1914):

**Gurdit Singh** was a Sikh Contractor residing in Amritsar, but had also lived in different places in South East Asia. He was moved by the dreams and vigor of a large contingent of Sikhs who wanted to immigrate to Canada and US. He chartered the steamship 'KomagataMaru' and decided to take these people from India to Canada. But as per the **1908 Continuous Passage Act** of the Canada Government, all the potential migrants had to undertake a continuous voyage or journey to Canada without stopping anywhere in between. Another provision stated that the immigrants of 'Indian' origin would not be permitted unless they

<sup>12</sup> FOUNDSF,  
<https://www.foundsf.org/index.php?title=India%27s%20Ghadar%20Party%20Born%20in%20San%20Francisco> (Last Visited October 6, 2021).

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*

were having \$200 in their possession. The Canadian immigration policy at that time was designed in such a manner that it actively kept out Asiatic people including Indians and was a clear form of 'SMART DISCRIMINATION' as they wanted to keep the unwanted out.<sup>14</sup>

The brunt of these policies was faced by the sailors of Komagata Maru as they were refused the permission to dock at Burrard Inlet near Vancouver on 23rd May, 1914, and were detained. It was in this context that the Indian Diaspora in VANCOUVER came to the front and formed different 'Shore Committees' to help out the passengers with legal measures and other necessities such as food. On September 27, the ship arrived at the 'Budge Budge' dock in Calcutta but was fired upon by the British gunboats just at the entry point. This led to the killing of 19 passengers and the rest were kept in incarceration until the end of WW1. At the end of the episode, only 20 people could satisfy the authorities regarding their staying back and rest had their dreams shattered.<sup>15</sup>

This was the time when the revolutionary Ghadar Party was having its sway over the Indian Diaspora dispersed in **US and Canada** and the leaders decided to return to India and initiate a revolution. For the Indian Student Societies present across the Pacific Coast, including Oregon and California, 'Clarion calls' were sounded that urged Indians to 'go back and fight'. This incident not only gave shape to Indian immigration but also catalyzed Indian Nationalism. It became a rallying point, instead a milestone for the diasporic involvement in social justice.<sup>16</sup>

Though this incident is remembered as a dark phase in Canadian history, in India, it still remains almost forgotten. The Indian Government in 1952 constructed a monument at Budge Budge to pay honors to the martyrs of Komagata Maru. The Sikhs make a visit to the monument to pay homage to the martyrs. Moreover, **Canadian President**, Justin Trudeau on May 18, 2016, formally **apologized** for the 1914 incident on the behalf of the then Canadian Government and said that they will not be repeating those mistakes.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> JAMHOOR, <https://www.jamhoor.org/read/rememering-the-ghadar-party>, (Last visited October 7, 2021).

<sup>15</sup> LIVE HISTORY INDIA, <https://www.livehistoryindia.com/story/cover-story/the-saga-of-the-komagata-maru/>, (last visited October 7, 2021).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

## B) AZAD HIND FAUJ AND THE SUBHASH CHANDRA BOSE' ARMY:

It was in the backdrop of the Second World War that South East Asia was invaded by Japan. In 1942, it conducted a **lightning campaign** in Singapore as well as the Malayan Peninsula as a result of which about 45,000 Indian prisoners of war were captured from **Singapore** alone. The Japanese then created an auxiliary army with the support of these prisoners of war to fight against the British. The first 'INDIAN NATIONAL ARMY (INA) was led by **Mohan Singh** who was captured during the British invasion of the Malay Peninsula. The conditions of the Prisoners of war in camps as well as extreme resentment against the British led to many prisoners of war voluntarily joining the INA<sup>18</sup>.

Initially, it received considerable amount of support and funds from the Imperial Japanese army and the Ethnic Indian Diaspora of South-East Asia. But later owing to disagreements between Japanese army Command and Mohan Singh over the question of autonomy of the INA led to its disbanding in December 1942. Singh recommended **Subhash Chandra Bose** for leadership role in the formation of second INA as he was known to both the Diaspora of South East Asia as well the Imperial Japanese army as a committed nationalist. Therefore, the Diaspora was more willing to go ahead with the Bose' idea of an army. As a result, Bose arrived at Singapore in July 1943 upon Japanese invitation and took command of the second INA or 'AZAD HIND FAUJ'. The Army participated in 'OPERATION U-Go' in 1944 which was a Japanese campaign against British India. But the Battles of Imphal and Kohima led to the disastrous defeat of the Japanese army along with the INA.<sup>19</sup>

## CONCLUDING REMARKS:

From the above discussion, it could be easily concluded that the Indian Diaspora is not a homogenous community as it happened over several years in different time periods and is inclusive of different kinds and spectrum of movements. The role of the Diaspora in the Indian freedom struggle was quite instrumental. The Ghadar Party's headquarter located at '5 Wood

<sup>18</sup> NEOSTENCIL, <https://neostencil.com/upsc-modern-history-the-indian-national-army>, (Last visited October 7, 2021)

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

Street' at San Francisco, popularly known as the 'GHADAR ASHRAM' was handed over to the Government of India in 1949; however, legally it was transferred in June 1952. The original building was completely tumbled down. Since 1952, efforts have been made by the local Indian community as well as the Indian government to repair and restore it. The government also sanctioned US\$ 83,000 for this very purpose. Shri T.N. Kaul, the then Indian ambassador to US eventually inaugurated the Ghadar memorial in March 1975.<sup>20</sup> Celebrating the Centenary of the Ghadar Movement in 2013, PM Dr. Manmohan Singh announced the amelioration of the memorial into a museum and library along with a sculpture to pay honors to the heroes of the movement. It was on March 6, 2019 that Ambassador Sanjay Panda; Consul General of India San Francisco finally signed an agreement with 'CONSULTANT IYER AND ASSOCIATES' in the Ghadar Hall amidst the Indian Community representatives from Los Angeles, San Francisco, Stockton and Fresno.<sup>21</sup>

The Indian Diasporic personalities who have been mentioned in this article were Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, atheists, etc, but their vigor and passion to see their homeland independent transcended all sorts of boundaries and developed in them a shared sense of radicalism. Therefore, the success enjoyed by the Indian Diaspora across the world because of their determination, vigor and seamless setting of global networks could very well be traced in history.

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<sup>20</sup>CONSULATE GENERAL OF INDIA, SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA,  
<https://www.cgisf.gov.in/page/gadar-memorial-hall/>, (Last visited on October 7, 2021).

<sup>21</sup>INDIA WEST,  
[https://www.indiawest.com/letters\\_to\\_editor/sf-gadar-memorial-museum-and-library/article\\_514ea40c-45c5-11e9-8b64-87abf81ef2e8.html](https://www.indiawest.com/letters_to_editor/sf-gadar-memorial-museum-and-library/article_514ea40c-45c5-11e9-8b64-87abf81ef2e8.html) (Last Visited October 8, 2021).