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Indo-Canadian Diaspora



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Abstract

Indo-Canadian Diaspora

The word Diaspora is not a substitute for the word immigrant. Diaspora essentially is a bitter experience of dislocation that leads to alienation, a sense of loss and nostalgic desires. It refers to that particular class of immigrants who are unable to go back, primarily because of the hostile climate of discrimination in the country of birth. The hostile climate is intolerable in the land of birth and tolerable in the land of adoption. Usually Diasporans are not happy anywhere, and suffer silently. Diaspora in Greek means dispersion or scattering. In Hebrew, the word that is used for Diaspora is Galut, which means exile. It referred to the Jewish communities scattered in exile outside Palestine. Those Jewish communities were exiled from their homeland by Roman authorities between 66 and 70 CE. Diaspora therefore is “expulsion of a national from his country by the government or voluntary removal of a citizen, usually in order to escape punishment.” Here the word Diaspora is contemplated on in a special reference of those Canadians whose origins trace back to India. Most Canadians of Indian origin prefer to identify themselves as, “Indian”, rather than “East Indian” or “South Asian” basically because these two terms are used to distinguish these people of ancestral origin from India. Another term, NRI (non-resident Indian), is used by Indians in India to refer to Indians abroad, including Canada. This paper will be focusing on the roots of Indo-Canadian Diaspora that actually began in the beginning of the 20th century of which the main pioneers were the Sikhs. Most Sikhs were the veterans of British Army. These were in fact those retired soldiers for whom the pension was not sufficient for livelihood. As their lands were still gripped by the money-lenders; as a result of which they had to turn back to the places they’d visited including the western coast of Canada. This was the phase of Indian Diaspora where people joined from the various parts of the world also like Burma, Malaysia, the East Indies, the Philippines, and China. The Indian Diaspora started mainly after the British made India a part of the empire. Indians were taken as forced labour in the nineteenth century to



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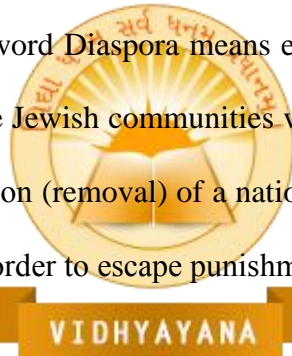
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other parts of the empire, including Fiji, Maritius, Guyana, Trinidad, Suriname and Malaysia. Canada has a sizeable number of immigrants of Indian origin from African and Caribbean nations. Several of them are the descendents of the Indian Diaspora of colonial days.

Indo-Canadian Diaspora

Etymologically, the term Diaspora is coined, as we know, from the Greek word *Diaspeirein* that means "to scatter about or disperse", *Dia* means "about or across" and *Speirein* means "to scatter". It was used by the ancient Greeks to refer to the citizens of a dominant city-state who immigrated to a conquered land with the purpose of colonization, to assimilate the territory into the empire. Thus, Diaspora, in Greek, means dispersion or scattering. In Hebrew, the word Diaspora means exile. It referred to the Jewish communities scattered in exile outside Palestine. Those Jewish communities were exiled from their homeland by Roman authorities. Diaspora therefore is "expulsion (removal) of a national from his country by the government or voluntary removal of a citizen, usually in order to escape punishment." ¹



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The main Diaspora began in the 8th - 6th centuries BC, and even before the sack of Jerusalem in AD 70 when the number of Jews dispersed by the Diaspora as for them it was greater than that of living in Israel. Thereafter, Jews were dispersed even more widely throughout the Roman world and beyond. ²

In the Encyclopedia Americana, Volume 9, Diaspora is defined as below,

"Diaspora is the name given to the Jewish emigrants in the time of the Apostle. The Jewish were scattered abroad over the face of the earth. The Roman Empire had in many of its cities these Jewish colonies. In the lands east of the empire they found their way. This wide spread movement was due in some quarters to forcible deportation by conquering peoples, as in the Euphrates Valley. Other groups went forth after the



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failure of the Meccabean patriots to perpetuate their kingdom. Others no doubt left their native land for commercial reasons. Usually they had their own community organization, which sometimes became very powerful, as it did for instance in Alexandria. The organization was commercial as well as religious.”³

As the Christian mythology, God ordered Adam and Eve to leave paradise till the day of judgment because they violated the order given by God of not to eat the forbidden fruit which they tested having been misguided by the Satan who too was thrown out of the paradise. Satan did so under the strong feeling of revenge. Then the God said as mentioned in the Septuagint - a Greek version of the Hebrew Bible, “*thou shall be a Diaspora in all kingdoms of the earth*”.⁴

This biggest mythological fact of the history of human existence and race is recorded in Holy Scriptures of Islamic Classical Sciences also like Christianity; where Adam is known as Dada Aadam and Eve as Hava - the first woman of the earth. They are known as the first humans of the universe.

In order to remove the lonesomeness of Adam, a female mate named Hawa (Eve) was created. The Prophet Adam (peace be upon him) and his wife Hawa were given a place in the Garden (of Bliss) to reside. The Holy Qur'an affirms:

"And O' Adam! Dwell you and your wife in the Garden (of Bliss) and

eat there from wherever you will

but approach not this tree lest you should be:among the wrong-doers." (7: 20)⁵

The Prophet Adam (peace be upon him) and his wife used to live happily in the Garden of Bliss. They were endowed with the knowledge to discriminate between good and evil. They were also warned of the power



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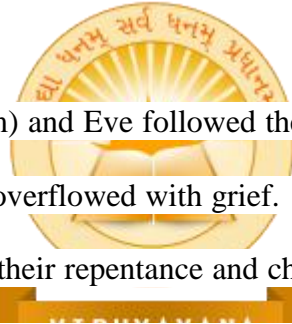
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of evil. They overpowered all sorts of evil temptations at first and tried hard to ward off the influence of Satan. But he made numerous attempts to misguide them off and on. Finally Satan succeeded in his mission and made them approach that specific tree. Instantly evil consequences appeared. The Holy Qur'an says:

"When they both tasted of the tree, their private parts became manifest to each other and they both began to cover themselves with the leaves of the trees (in the garden), and their Lord called them saying: Did I not forbid you both from that tree and tell you that Satan was your avowed enemy. They said: Our Lord! We have wronged ourselves. If you forgive us not and bestow not upon us Your mercy, we shall surely be of the losers." (7: 23, 24) ⁵ The Quran



He, the Prophet Adam (peace be upon him) and Eve followed the temptations of Iblis and were deprived of the heavenly bliss. They were, however, overflowed with grief. They requested Almighty Allah to forgive them. Allah, the Most Merciful accepted their repentance and chose them for His mercy. At the same time He dispelled them from the Garden of Bliss. They became ordinary people. They had to live like us for only a certain span of life on this earth. They would be recreated again to be judged for their actions on the Day of Judgement.

During the ancient times a large number of Indians migrated to Far East and South East Asia to spread Buddhism. During the colonial period, the migration was a history of misery, deprivation and sorrow. Then after, migrations started taking place for economical betterments and affluence. It is also observed that people from middle class family also going to abroad for getting their bread and butter as they did not see better opportunities here in India. It is also a reality that they didn't have enough education, never the less they did have some other skills which they materialized and going to countries like Canada, Dubai and



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Africa. In Muslims, 95% people belonging to Khatri Caste are either settled or living in abroad for survival which of course should never be taken as Diasporic nature.

A Diaspora is "the movement, migration, or scattering of people away from an established or ancestral homeland" or "people dispersed by whatever cause to more than one location", or "people settled far from their ancestral homelands".

The word has come to refer to historical mass-dispersions of people with common roots, particularly movements of an involuntary nature, such as the expulsion of Jews from the Middle East, the African [Trans-Atlantic slave trade](#), the southern Chinese during the [coolie slave trade](#), or the century-long exile of the [Messenians](#) under [Spartan](#) rule. Recently, scholarship has distinguished between different kinds of diaspora, based on its causes such as [imperialism](#), trade or labor migrations, or by the kind of social coherence within the diaspora community and its ties to the ancestral lands. Some diaspora communities maintain strong political ties with their homeland. Other qualities that may be typical of many diasporas are thoughts of return, relationships with other communities in the diaspora, and lack of full assimilation into the host country.

When capitalized and without modifiers (that is, simply *the Diaspora*), the term refers specifically to the [Jewish diaspora](#); when uncapitalized the word *diaspora* may be used to refer to [refugee](#) populations of other origins or ethnicities. The wider application of *diaspora* evolved from the Assyrian two-way mass deportation policy of conquered populations to deny future territorial claims on their part. ⁶

As Dr. Stephen Gill rightly says,

The word Diaspora is not a substitute for the word immigrant. Diaspora essentially is a bitter



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*experience of dislocation that leads to alienation, a sense of loss and nostalgic desires. It refers to that particular class of immigrants who are unable to go back, primarily because of the hostile climate of discrimination in the country of birth. The hostile climate is intolerable in the land of birth and tolerable in the land of adoption. Usually Diasporans are not happy anywhere, and suffer silently.*⁷

As rightly defined, the words 'Diaspora' and 'Immigrant' are in many measures different from each other. Diaspora is meant to be forceful immigration. In fact, Diaspora is more to be felt than to be interpreted which is ironically painful. A sense of loss and nostalgic desires are something which are not so easily explicable. Those who have undergone this intolerable period are feeling uprooted and belong to nowhere. The reasons of such huge migration from one place to another are many; they are unspeakable. There are social, political, economical, national and religious forces which bring Diaspora into being. Tragedy is there when the people victimized of Diaspora have no land to live. They find aggressive climate where they are born and as a result they have to leave that place and they are not fully adopted where they finally go and so they always feel a silent sense of loss.

Who are Indo Canadians?

Indo-Canadians are the Canadians whose roots are in India. Most Canadians of Indian origin like to identify themselves as, "Indian", rather than "East Indian". This is partially because historically the Americas were mistaken by Columbus as India and Native Americans were mistaken by Columbus for Indians and later as West Indians. It is also seen to be a reflection of India's size and stature, as well as its cultural, economic and political position in the world.



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However, because the term East Indian is not blatantly pejorative and persists in being widely used by other Canadians, this term is also somewhat acceptable and tolerated by most Indo-Canadians. The term "East Indian" is relatively unknown in India. Another term, NRI ([non-resident Indian](#)), is used by Indians in India to refer to Indians abroad, including Canada.

The Diasporic Indian is like the banyan tree, the traditional symbol of the Indian way of life, he spreads out his roots in several soils, drawing nourishment from one when the rest dry up. Far from being homeless, he has several homes, and that is the only way he has increasingly come to feel at home in the world. With the globalization of national economies, the chutnification of cultures and Bollywood's increasing cultural appeal and reach, Indians became one of the forces to flatten the world. Indians in the USA are one of the largest among the groups of Indian diasporas, about 2.5 million. They are well represented in all walks of life particularly in academia, LT. and medicine.¹



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Indian Diaspora

The Indian Diaspora was born mainly when India was in the British clutches. Indians were forcefully taken for sever toil in the nineteenth century to other parts of the empire, including Fiji, Maritius, Guyana, Trinidad, Suriname and Malaysia. Canada has a sizeable number of immigrants of Indian origin from African and Caribbean nations. Several of them are the descendents of the Indian Diaspora during colonial days. The Indian Diaspora started in the form of indentured labourers, who were needed in different British colonies because of the abolition of slavery. At that time, India was a British colony as were the Caribbean Islands. Indians were sent there as indentured labours to work in sugar plantations. Their living conditions were brutal. The major Diasporas have marked similarities. One is their loss of homeland and the sufferings



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connected with this loss. In all these stories, migration was under compulsion. The present use of the term Indian Diaspora, particularly when it refers to Indo-Canadian writers, is loaded with confusion. There are misinterpretations and conflicts calling it immigrant, visitor, racial, minorities, ethnic groups, refugee, new Canadian, workers, expatriates, travellers, and other categories.

Sometimes the word is used to include nearly every one; even those who were born outside the country in which they live. If Diaspora is analyzed in the light of its original use that was for the Jews and the major Diasporas of non-Jews, it becomes necessary to include the elements of alienation, loss, forced migration, and a dream to return to the land of birth. It may include also the unwilling acceptance of the host country.

Indo Canadian Diaspora

In 1897 a contingent of Sikh soldiers were in the parade celebrating Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in London, England. They on their succeeding journey, visited the western coast of Canada, which was very sparsely populated and the Canadian government was willing to settle in order to prevent a conquest of the territory by the United States.

After the retirement, due to economic crises, they went back to the countries they had visited to try their fortunes. They joined an Indian diaspora, which included people from many other Asian countries. They got job in the police force and some were employed as night-watchmen by British firms. Others started small businesses of their own or drove taxis. These were modest beginnings but they had bigger ideas.

Initial Struggles

Although in the first segment Sikh immigrants had to encounter sever racism by the local white Canadians.



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Most of the white Canadians feared workers who would work for less pay, and that an influx of more immigrants would turn them unsafe which caused riots and torture to the immigrants as a result of which most decided to return back to India, while a few stayed behind. To support the white Canadian population on the west coast of Canada, who did not want Indians to immigrate to Canada, the Canadian government prevented Indian men from bringing their wives and children until 1919, which was another serious reason in their decision to leave Canada.

The restrictions by the Canadian government increased on Indians, and policies were put in place in 1907 to prevent Indians who had the right to vote from voting in future general elections. Furthermore, government quotas were established to cap the number of Indians allowed to immigrate to Canada in the early 20th century. This was part of a policy adopted by Canada to ensure that the country retained its primarily European demographic, and was similar to [American](#) and [Australian](#) immigration policies at the time. These quotas only allowed fewer than 100 people from India a year until 1957, when it was marginally increased (to 300 people a year). In comparison to the quotas established for Indians, people from Europe immigrated freely without quotas in large numbers during that time to Canada, numbering in the tens of thousands yearly.

In 1914, the [Komagata Maru](#) a steam liner carrying 376 passengers from [Punjab](#), India (all were [British](#) subjects) arrived in [Vancouver](#). Most of the passengers were not allowed to land in Canada and were returned to India. When the Kamagata Maru returned to Calcutta (now Kolkata), they were fired upon by the British, many died. Viewing this as evidence that Indians were not treated as equals under the [British Empire](#), they staged a peaceful protest upon returning to India. British forces saw this as a threat to their authority, and opened fire on the protestors, killing many. This was one of the most notorious "incidents" in the history of exclusion laws in Canada designed to keep out immigrants of Asian origin.



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Changes

Policies changed rapidly during the second half of the 20th century. The Canadian government re-enfranchised the Indo-Canadian community with the right to vote in 1947. In 1967 all immigration quotas based on specific ethnic groups were scrapped in Canada. The social view in Canada towards people of other ethnic backgrounds was more open, and Canada was facing declining immigration from European countries, since these European countries had booming postwar economies, and thus more people decided to remain in their home countries. Canada introduced an immigration policy that was based on a point system, with each applicant being assessed on their trade skills and the need for these skills in Canada. This allowed many more Indians to immigrate in large numbers. In the 1970s, thousands of immigrants came yearly and mainly settled in Vancouver and Toronto. In the 1980s and early 1990s, tens of thousands of immigrants continued to move from India into Canada. According to [Statistics Canada](#), since the late 1990s roughly 25,000-30,000 Indians arrive each year (which is now the second-most populous cultural group immigrating to Canada each year, behind Chinese immigrants who are the largest group). The settlement pattern in the last two decades is still mainly focused around Vancouver, but other cities such as Calgary, Edmonton and Montreal have also become desirable due to growing economic prospects in these cities.



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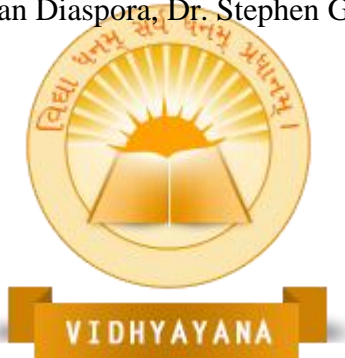
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