

INDO-AMERICAN RELATIONS IN A NEW LIGHT

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Delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Indian Association of American Studies,
1999. Revised

No two countries are as misunderstood by each other as the United States and India. The misunderstanding goes back to a period after WWII, to a period when India achieved its independence from colonial rule and the United States emerged as one of the two global superpowers. Partly this is due to the relative lack of historical contact between India and the U.S. This lack of historical contact between India and the United States is in contrast to America's much longer contact with two other Asian civilizations: China and Japan.

Indians generally misperceive the history of Indo-American relations. Many people in India have heard about the Boston Tea Party, and some believe that goods imported into the colonies from India were a major cause of the American Revolution. This is not so. All that happened was that tea that originated from India was dumped into the Boston Harbor by American freedom fighters to protest the British monarch's policies of mercantilism.

Lord Cornwallis, Governor General of India from 1786 to 1793, provides another minor footnote to history. Before being sent to India, Cornwallis was the British General deputed to deal with the American revolutionaries. He was defeated at Yorktown in 1781 by American freedom fighters, thus sealing the fate of British power in North America. After his defeat, Cornwallis was sent to India as the Governor General of the East India Company. This development did not lead to any meaningful relations between India and the U.S.

It is interesting to note however that the British colonial yoke was imposed on the people of India just as it was lifted off the backs of the people in America. Along with Robert Clive and Warren Hastings, Cornwallis is the architect of British Empire in India.

There is one exception to the lack of historical contact between India and America. This is represented by the Transcendental Movement in the United States in the 1830s and 1840s. Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau were the leading figures in this free thought movement. The transcendentalists were deeply influenced by their reading of the *Upanishads* and of the *Bhagavad Gita*. Emerson's lecture on the "Oversoul" delivered in 1844 at the Harvard Divinity School shows how much he had been influenced by Vedantic philosophy. More on this later.

I will first describe the downward drift that occurred in Indo-American relations during the Cold War period. Then I will describe the changes that occurred in the late 20th century. I am optimistic about Indo-American relations in the 21st century. Three reasons are specified for this optimism: (1) the improved economic relations between the two countries, (2) the growing clout of Indian Americans (called non-resident Indians or NRIs), and (3) the growing interest in Eastern spirituality (Hinduism and Buddhism) in America.

THE BEGINNING OF THE COLD WAR

The Cold War may be said to begin on March 12, 1947, when President Harry S Truman appeared before a joint session of the US Congress to request \$400 million to defend the borders of Greece and Turkey against the threat of Soviet expansionism. This policy became known as the Truman Doctrine.

The year 1947 also witnessed the launching by the United States of the Marshall Plan for European reconstruction, named after the then Secretary of State George C. Marshall. Through the Marshall Plan, the United States gave to Western Europe in excess of \$12 billion. The economic rebuilding program in Western Europe has been immensely successful. Nations of Western Europe have become economic power houses in less than 50 years. This is remarkable because European economies were shattered during the War.

As the European economic development proceeded, so did the military rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. In February, 1948 the Soviet government engineered the overthrow of a democratic government in Czechoslovakia and imposed a communist regime. In July 1948, the infamous Berlin Blockade was imposed by the Soviet Union in an effort to drive the Western Powers out of the city.

The American response to Soviet expansionist moves has been called “the Containment Policy.” George F. Kennan, a young State Department employee in 1947 provided a rationale for this policy. In an article written for *Foreign Affairs* (July 1947, p 576), Kennan wrote:

“ there must be a long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies....The Soviet pressure against the free institutions of the western world is something that can be contained by the adroit and vigilant application of counter-force at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points. . . . The Soviet thesis not only implies complete lack of control by the west over its own economic destiny, it likewise assumes Russian unity, discipline and patience over an infinite period. . . the future of Soviet power may not be by any means as secure as

Russian capacity for self-delusion would make it appear to the men in the Kremlin. . . .

“The possibility remains (and in the opinion of this writer it is a strong one) that Soviet power . . . bears within it the seeds of its own decay, and that the sprouting of these seeds is well under way.”

When the Soviet system collapsed in 1991, an aging George F. Kennan had the satisfaction of knowing that the policy he recommended 44 years earlier had borne fruit.

THE COLD WAR AND INDO-AMERICAN RELATIONS

Prior to the ensuing of the Cold War in 1947, the United States sympathized with the Indian struggle for independence. The sympathy for India’s struggle was natural: America herself had been a colony of the British. Mahatma Gandhi was highly popular in the U.S. Secretary of State George C. Marshall described Mahatma Gandhi as “the spokesman of the moral conscience of mankind.” In an opinion survey, the American public selected Mahatma Gandhi and Charlie Chaplain as being the most admired persons in the world. Charlie Chaplain was a great tragic-comedy actor of silent films. Both Gandhi and Charlie Chaplain stood for the dignity of the little man.

Soon after 1947, however, relations between India and the US took a downward turn. The downward turn continued for nearly half-a-century. The reasons lie in the failed policies of India’s first Prime minister, Pundit Jawaharlal Nehru, and in the narrow view of the world held by the then Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles.

Pundit Nehru (prime minister 1947-64) was an immensely popular world leader for several reasons. He was an aristocrat with an aristocrat’s demeanor. He was good-looking and charming. He was a scholar of high caliber. He wrote the acclaimed *Discovery of India* (1946), and *Glimpses of World History* (1934), among other books. The intelligentsia respected his scholarship.

Added to all these personal attributes was the fact that Nehru was a committed democrat and a secularist. This position was admired in the West. Nehru helped fashion a democratic constitution for a large under-developed country. Nehru also inherited Mahatma Gandhi’s mantle. The Mahatma was a revered global figure of immense moral force.

Under Nehru, India emerged as a leader of the Afro-Asian group of countries. Along with Nasser of Egypt, Tito of Yugoslavia and Sukarno of Indonesia, Pundit Nehru helped define the international role for the newly emerging nations of the

world. Nehru was admittedly the leader of the so-called “non-alignment ” movement during the early Cold War years.

Because of Nehru's stature, the American leadership sought him as a partner in its efforts to check Soviet expansionism. The United States would have done almost anything to have Nehru on its side. Democratic India was perceived as a counterweight to Communist China. The natural alliance between the United States and India did not happen. Mistakes were made on both sides.

Nehru had spent his formative student years in Britain. Nehru assessed American culture through the eyes of the British. The British viewed Americans as being crude, boorish, and *nouveau riche*. Nehru learned these negative views about America while he was an impressionable student at Eton and Cambridge.

Nehru was a socialist. He imbibed socialist ideology while being a student at the London School of Economics. Nehru saw the evils of capitalism in the functioning of the American economic system –concentration of wealth, consumerism, boom and bust cycles, an underprivileged lower class, and the influence of big capital on public policy. His anti-capitalistic views were reinforced by V. K. Krishna Menon, his friend and India's spokesman at the United Nations in New York City. Krishna Menon, who is said to have lived on tea and biscuits, was a staunch socialist in his convictions, perhaps even a covert or “a crypto” communist. He was a passionate and a fiery speaker. America was frequently the recipient of Menon's wrath. Menon helped India distance itself from America.

Mistakes were made on the American side too. The United States perceived the world as being bipolar. The bipolarity was between good and evil, between God and Satan. In a war of righteousness, one cannot take a middle position; one cannot sit on the fence. The very powerful Secretary of State John Foster Dulles declared: “They who are not with us are against us.” India's neutrality and its policy of non-alignment were not accepted by him as being morally defensible.

To contain the power of the Soviet Union, the U. S. undertook the creation of certain defensive military alliances. North Atlantic Treaty Organization or NATO was established in 1949. The Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) and the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) both were created a few years later. The United States would have welcomed India's membership in these military alliances. Nehru was not amenable to any such partnership. Having received a cold shoulder from Nehru, the United States turned to Pakistan as a junior ally. Pakistan became a member both of SEATO and CENTO. Pakistan was not sincere in its anti-Communist zeal. Russia and China were not the enemies. It joined the military alliances for opportunistic reasons in order to receive American military aid. The weapons could then be used against India.

Spurned by America's military aid to Pakistan, India gravitated towards the Soviet Union. It consistently opposed the United States in the UN. For example, India championed China's admission to the UN. The United States opposed it. India supported Arab position against Israel. The U. S. took the opposite stand. It may be noted parenthetically that India's support of the Arab cause was rooted in its domestic politics. Anti-Israeli policies were popular with Indian Muslim voters, who constituted an important voting bloc for India's ruling Congress party. While these pro-China and anti-Israeli policies were popular at their time in India, history has shown them to be "failed" policies. These policies did not serve India well.

Indo-American relations reached a low point during the 1971 Bangladesh war. India supported Bangladesh's struggle for freedom from Pakistani war of genocide. America "tilted" to the side of Pakistan.

Indo-American relations improved a bit in the 1980s during the Reagan presidency (1980-88). The upward movement in relations continued during both the Bush presidency (1988-92) and the early years of the Clinton presidency. The two countries engaged in a dialog to redefine their "strategic relationship." Then Pokharan I and II happened in May 1998. India test- exploded its nuclear devices. This derailed the burgeoning Indo-American relations.

The United States government took a hard stand against India becoming a Nuclear power. I believe America's opposition to India's minimum nuclear deterrence is indefensible. It ignores India's legitimate security needs against rival China and unstable Pakistan.

Another issue is India's demand for a permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council. The United States is lukewarm to this demand. The U.S. supports a permanent seat for Germany (80 million people) and for Japan (125 million people) but not for India (1 billion people). This does not sit well with Indians.

Things did begin to change in the new century. President Clinton's traveled to India in March, 2000, the first visit of a U.S. President in 22 years. Clinton was extremely popular with the Indian public. He was pictured dancing with admiring Indian women in the State of Rajasthan. Prime Minister Vajpayee paid a return visit to the U.S. in September. He addressed a joint session of the U.S. Congress. These visits opened a new chapter in Indo-American relations.

A mutuality of interest is recognized on both sides. India hopes to attract greater foreign financial investment. It also seeks to establish itself as a key regional and international player. It needs America's help in achieving these goals. In turn, the United States wants to open India's markets for American goods, to limit nuclear proliferation, and with Indian partnership to checkmate Chinese influence in South and Southeast Asia.

The events of 9/11/2001 helped bring India and the U.S. closer together. India is an important ally in fighting terrorism. However, India criticized the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. Given the different perception on issues and the checkered history of the Indo-American relations, progress is slow.

INDO-AMERICAN RELATIONS IN A NEW LIGHT

I believe Indo-American relations will enter a new period of comity and friendship in the 21st century. This view is greatly optimistic from the vantage point of 1999 when these remarks were first penned. The globe however is being transformed rapidly. Who could foresee merely ten years ago that the Soviet Union would collapse as a superpower? Who could foresee that the Berlin Wall would come down?

The Cold War that poisoned the relations between India and the U.S. is behind us. With the Cold War gone, India and America have little reason to be distant from each other. Three factors will help redefine Indo-American relations in the new century:

- 1. Burgeoning economic relations between the two countries**
- 2. Growing size of the Indian population in the United States**
- 3. The growing American interest in Eastern spirituality (Hindu and Buddhist)**

ECONOMIC RELATIONS

India has begun to liberalize its economic system. State owned economic enterprises are being dismantled. Foreign investment, once looked at with suspicion, is now welcome. The economic transformation started under Prime Minister P.N. Rao (1991-96). It picked up speed under the BJP Government of A. B. Vajpayee. As a response to these new policies, American financial investments in India have increased dramatically. India is becoming economically important to the U. S. Over time, mutual economic interests will begin to override political differences.

PEOPLE OF INDIAN ORIGIN IN THE UNITED STATES

In the 1990 Census, people who originated from India numbered 800,000. This number doubled to 1.7 million in the Census of 2000. The number is likely to double again by the year 2,010.

Indian immigrants are well placed in the professions and in business. Their average family income is higher than of other ethnic groups in the U.S., including whites. They rank higher in educational achievement. Indian Americans occupy the top rungs of the economic ladder in the United States. It is easily observed that every

large university in America has several Indian professors on its staff; every hospital has Indian doctors; and every manufacturing plant has Indian engineers. Indian software professionals have acquired a global reputation. I was told by an American consular officer that of all the H-1 working visas that are issued by the American Consulates around the globe, 80 percent of the working visas are issued in India, with the Madras (now Chennai) leading the pack.

Members in the audience perhaps know that the migration of people from India into the United States is of recent vintage. It began in 1965 with the change in American immigration policy. Prior to the 1965 change, America allowed immigration under a "quota system". The West European countries such as England, France and Germany had large quotas, Eastern European countries had comparatively smaller quotas. Asian countries had tiny quotas. Prior to 1965, India had a tiny quota of 100 persons per year. See my article on "Asian Americans" at www.uwf.edu/lgoel.

The Indian community in the U.S. has begun to flex their political muscle. Numerous social, religious, political and action groups have sprung up. A majority of the groups serve the social, religious, and cultural needs of the community. Others are explicitly political in nature and aspiration. They raise money to finance election campaigns and to lobby government. As a result of these efforts, over a 100 members of the U.S. Congress are organized into India Caucus to defend India's interests. It is the largest country-related congressional Caucus of its type. Both Democrats and Republicans serve on the India Caucus. The then Senator Connie Mack of Florida defended India's position on the nuclear issue on the Senate floor. Congressmen Frank Pallone and Gary Ackerman did the same on the floor of the House of Representatives.

American Congressmen and Senators are known to consider and be influenced by citizen pressure and their lobbying activities. The Jewish lobby in the U.S. is known to be highly effective in this respect. The U.S. government routinely defends Israel's interests against its Arab enemies. Similarly, the American sympathy for the Catholic cause in Northern Ireland is influenced by the large Irish population in America. Indians wish to copy the Jewish and the Irish examples..

EASTERN SPIRITUALITY IN AMERICA

Americans increasingly take interest in Eastern spiritual practices derived from Hinduism and Buddhism. A growing number practice yoga and meditation. Some chant Vedic mantras in congregational gatherings (*Satsangs*). College courses on Eastern religions are generally well subscribed.

American interest in Indian spirituality is traced back to the Transcendentalist Movement of the middle of the 19th century.

THE TRANSCENDENTALIST MOVEMENT

Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau were the leaders of the Transcendentalist Movement in the U.S. in the 1830s and 1840s. Others included Margaret Fuller, Palmer Peabody, James Freeman Clark, and Charles and Myrtle Fillmore. Henry David Thoreau is better known in India. Thoreau's short book *Civil Disobedience* (1849) influenced Mahatma Gandhi as he developed his philosophy of *Satyagraha* to oppose the British colonial rule.

Ralph Waldo Emerson writes,

“In all nations there are minds which incline to dwell in the conception of the fundamental Unity. This tendency finds its highest expression in the religious writings of the East, and chiefly in the Indian Scriptures, in the Vedas, the Bhagavat Gita, and the Vishnu Purana.

...

“I owed a magnificent day to the Bhagavat-Gita. It was the first of books; it was as if an empire spoke to us, nothing small or unworthy, but large, serene, consistent, the voice of an old intelligence which in another age and climate had pondered and thus disposed of the same questions which exercise us.”

Emerson's ideas about God and the nature of the soul parallel those found in Hindu scriptures. He talked of “a divine presence” that permeates the whole creation and all living things. Behind the appearances in the universe, there is a Reality of a Being and Consciousness which is One and Eternal. This One Reality is the Self of all things. God could best be found by looking inward into the core of one's being, into one's Soul. By living according to the dictates of an Inner Will, one could transcend the materialist world of sense perception, the world of cause and effect. These ideas are best expressed in his lecture on the “Oversoul,” delivered at the Harvard Divinity School in 1844. The similarity between Emerson and Hindu philosophy is evident.

The transcendentalists believed that intuition rather than reason is the higher faculty. A mystical union with the Divine is the goal. The process of seeking unity with the Divine is inherently individualistic rather than congregational. Contemplative solitude is necessary. Henry David Thoreau lived in a small 10'x 15' cabin on the banks of Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts. He lived “deliberately” in the tradition of ancient Vedic Rishis or seers. His observations are recorded in a short book, *Walden* (1854). Thoreau wrote:

“In the morning I bathe my Intellect in the stupendous

and cosmogonical philosophy of the Bhagavad-gita, in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and trivial.”

NEW THOUGHT CHURCHES IN AMERICA

Emerson and his compatriots were criticized for being un-Christian and unconventional. Yet their ideas sprung forth a number of non-traditional Christian churches in America. Theosophists such as Madam Helena Blavatsky and Annie Besant also influenced the birth of new spirituality in the West.

Swami Vivekananda attended the Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 and acquired a large American following. He was followed by Parmahansa Yogananda, whose *Autobiography of a Yogi* has sold in millions. A stream of Hindu swamis traveled to the U.S. in the 1960s, including Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, Swami Muktananda, Bhaktivedanta Prabhupada, Swami Rama, Vishnu Devananda, Swami Sacchidananda, Swami Chinmayananda, Swami Dayananda and many others.

The so-called New Thought or New Age spiritual movement is a growing phenomenon in the United States. The New Thought churches include: the Unity Church of Christianity, Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, Science of Mind, Divine Science, Temple of the Universe, Theosophy, Self Realization Fellowship, the Centers for Spiritual Awareness and numerous other similar groups.

Occasionally, I attend services of the Unity Church of Christianity in Pensacola, Florida. The Unity Church is a New Thought church. It was founded by Charles and Myrtle Fillmore in 1889. I will describe here several of the Unity articles of faith.

1. Unity members affirm the following statement of Truth during their service: “There is One Power and One Presence in my life and in the universe, God.” Compare this statement of truth with the opening line of *Isa Upanishad*: “*Isa Vasyam Idam Sarvam*” --- “In the heart of everything, of whatever there is in the universe, dwells the Lord.” The similarity is self-evident.
2. Traditional Christianity posits a dual power: God and Satan. An important Unity principle is that duality itself springs from God. The Upanishad declares: Brahman (God) is *Ekam Advityam*, “One without a Second.”
3. The founder of Unity Church, Charles Fillmore and many of the Unity members believe in the theory of reincarnation. This is the belief that the Soul is permanent and that it is reborn after death. The cycle of birth and

death continues till the Soul gains divine perfection. Traditional Christianity posits a single life span for man and woman after which comes judgment.

4. **Unity Church is non-sectarian. One does not have to give up one's religion in order to join the Unity Church. I have never been pressured to convert. I have delivered several lectures at the Unity Church on Hinduism. This is in agreement with Hindu teachings of reverence for all spiritual paths.**
5. **Unity does not preach that Jesus was "the only Begotten Son of God." Jesus is regarded as a way-shower, a teacher and a master.**
6. **Prayer and meditation are an important part of Unity service. Every Sunday service includes a 20-minute period of meditation.**

Unity is one of the fastest growing churches in America. The story is told in *The Unity Way* by Marcus Bach (1982).

My hometown of Pensacola in NW Florida supports numerous Hinduism-related spiritual groups. Pensacola is a medium sized southern city with a metropolitan population of about 400,000. It is not a huge metropolis like Atlanta or New York.

- **Integral Knowledge Study Center.**
- **Self Realization Fellowship.**
- **The Sai Baba Group.**
- **Theosophical Society.**
- **The Siddha Yoga Meditation Center.**
- **Hatha Yoga classes are held at the Pensacola Junior College, the University of West Florida and at half a dozen additional sites in the city. Pensacola is the home to at least a dozen teachers of Hatha Yoga.**
- **I taught a class in beginning Sanskrit and Hindi at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Pensacola. Some 30 men and women ranging in age from 20 to 70 attended the class for a semester.**

The list given here is based purely on personal information and is not a systematic survey. Buddhist groups of which there are many in Pensacola are not included in the list above.

It is the native born white Americans who attend the group activities mentioned here, not members of the Indian community. Indians are noticed only in their absence.

I spent a week at the Siddha Yoga Ashram in South Fallsburg, N.Y. in the Catskill Mountains some time ago. The Ashram, spread over three large former luxury hotels, is founded by the late Swami Muktananda of Ganeshpuri, Maharashtra. The teachings are derived from Kashmir Shaivism. The Ashram draws thousands of American devotees from all over the United States and many from abroad. Members get up early in the morning to chant verses of the Guru Gita. The evening Kirtans (congregational chanting) are popular. The Siddha Yoga Ashram in South Fallsburgh, N.Y. is now larger than the mother Ashram at Ganeshpuri in India.
www.siddhayoga.org

Arsha Vidya Gurukulum at Saylorsbug, PA, in the Pocono Mountains is another popular Ashram. People come to the Ashram to learn Sanskrit, study Vedanta, do Hatha Yoga and meditate. This Ashram is founded by Swami Dayananda Saraswati. Two of the Sanskrit teachers at the Ashram are Americans, one of them a Ph.D. in Sanskrit. www.arshavidya.org

Dipak Chopra is a popular figure in the New Thought circles. His books such as *Timeless Mind and Ageless Body* have sold in the millions. The *Autobiography of a Yogi* by Swami Parmahansa Yogananda continues to sell in substantial numbers (originally published in 1946).

It has been observed that America is a land of fads. In this view, the New Age spiritual movement may just be a fad. Fads by definition are a temporary phenomenon. I do not share these views. I believe the American interest in Eastern spirituality is an abiding development. Many successful Americans realize that material abundance alone does not produce happiness or lead to fulfillment. This creates spiritual hunger which leads them to turn to Eastern spirituality.

AMERICA AS A GLOBAL NATION

The United States is a “global” nation in the sense that people from around the world have come to its shores. The strength of America lies in the fact that it renews its blood lines every generation. Today Asian Americans including people from India enrich its blood lines.

America is open to diverse philosophical and religious ideas. America has matured and is self-confident. The fact that Indian spiritual ideas have found a niche in America is a testimony to the openness of the American society.

Indo-American relations will take an upward turn in the twenty-first century. It is only fitting that they do so. It will immensely benefit both peoples.

Thank you ladies and gentlemen. I shall be happy to answer any questions.