

# India in the world: Hinduism, the Diaspora, and the Anxiety of Influence

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*The Indian diaspora has come out of the shadows in recent years. South Asians have transformed the face of the country that once colonized them. While software engineers were bringing Indians into the top echelons of the American corporate world, both Trinidad and Fiji witnessed the ascendancy of prime ministers of Indian descent. Even Bollywood, which always had a global presence in the southern hemisphere, has now come to the attention of the West. The comparatively small Indian diaspora has indubitably become a part of world culture. Curiously, this "triumph", if one may call it that, is accompanied by an immense anxiety, an anxiety of influence. Though Indians have done very well for themselves in the US, there is a widespread feeling that they remain invisible. Most professional Indians, especially Hindus, are persuaded that the world rides roughshod over them. The inability of the Indian nation-state to flex its muscles overseas is profoundly disturbing to Hindus, and though the recognition that yoga, samosas, curry, spiritual gurus, and beauty queens have brought to India is appreciated, Indians would much rather see India respected, even feared, as a world power. This anxiety of influence is conjoined with another -- namely, an anxiety that Hinduism is not quite a proper, and certainly not a world, religion. The transformations wrought within Hinduism in recent years, which are calculated to masculinize and homogenize the faith, are more productively viewed in this context.*

The Indian diaspora has, it appears, come out of the shadows in recent years, and its once largely forgotten histories, which encompass narratives of displacement and migration, are increasingly being viewed as an important and intrinsic part of the story of humanity's drift, in late modernity, towards globalization, transnational economic and cultural exchanges, and hybrid forms of political, cultural, and social identity. From Britain, the United States, and Canada to many of the less affluent nations of the South, the Indian diaspora seems to have registered its presence among those who are not generally inclined to lavish attention on India or its cultural mores. South Asians have, as many have suggested, transformed the face of the country that once colonized them, and in 'Balti Britain' chicken tikka masala has nearly become the national dish,<sup>1</sup> much as

the corner shop, once one of the quintessential representations of Englishness, has now become a Gujarati enclave. In the 1990s, Trinidad and Fiji both saw the emergence, though scarcely without misgivings on the part of considerable segments of their population, of prime ministers of Indian descent; in British Columbia, meanwhile, Ujjal Dosanjh, once a village boy in the Punjab, rose to the office of the Premier. The Indian presence in the United States is even more striking, and newspapers emanating from the large Indian community are prolific in their celebration of software engineers who have brought Indians into the top echelons of the American corporate world. Once upon a time Indians were devouring the novels of Walter Scott, Charles Dickens, and Jane Austen; now, both the novel, and the English language, have been enlivened in the hands of South Asian writers of the diaspora – Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, Salman Rushdie, VS Naipaul, his more gifted brother Shiva Naipaul, Arundhati Roy, Rohinton Mistry, Harold Sonny Ladoo, Anita Desai, and KS Maniam, among others. Even Bollywood, which always had a global presence in the southern hemisphere, seems poised to encroach upon territory that Hollywood took for granted. The diaspora, as an entire stream of recent films testifies, is never far from Bollywood's horizon; on the other hand, now that the West has awoken to the modern Hindi cinema, "Bollywood" and "culture" can be spoken of in the same breath without acute embarrassment. These are but fragments of a story that is now beginning to be told of a comparatively small diaspora that has indubitably become a part of world culture.

In the midst of these celebrations over the awakening, and perhaps emerging influence, of the Indian Diaspora, recently epitomized in the gathering of delegates from all over the world under the bosom of mother India in a capital city designed to trumpet the majesty of the British Empire,<sup>2</sup> few people have paused to probe the circumstances under which the Indian diaspora should have arisen from the ashes over the last few years, and what this awakening portends for India, its diasporic people, and Hinduism, a religion the vast bulk of whose practitioners are still to be found in India. Though it would be something of an exaggeration to suggest that there has always been an Indian diaspora, the modern history of indentured labor begins with the transportation of Indians to Mauritius in 1835, and the dispersal of Indians over large parts of the Caribbean by the mid-1850s. In 1995, Trinidad marked the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the arrival of Indians in that Caribbean island; indeed, "Arrival Day" is now a national (albeit contested) holiday in Trinidad & Tobago, though, I suspect, few middle-class people in India, much less anywhere else in the world, must be aware of this singularly interesting fact. One might think, then, apropos of the recent excitement over the diaspora, that the modern diaspora began when Indian CEOs of Silicon Valley corporate empires could be cited as authentic signs of the Indian diasporic presence, as figures worthy of emulation. Yet, since "success" is the all-meaningful concept that endears Indians in the industrialized West to the millions of middle-class Indians who await the call to migration, one wonders why the success stories of Indians in Trinidad or Fiji,

whose accomplishments by any measure were far more heroic, have never quite become part of the folklore of middle-class Indian sensibility. The largest business enterprises in Trinidad are owned mainly by Indians, but much more poignant is this: Indian hands, as George Lamming (1989:47) wrote, humanized the landscapes in the British Caribbean; it is also Indian hands that put the food on the table in Fijian homes. Similarly, though the recent worldwide circulation of India's information technology specialists is now narrativized as part of the history of globalization, as a promising instance of how globalization tells the story not merely of the inroads made by the West but of the rapid strides that can be made by elites of developing nations to insert themselves into the apparatus of global governance, one must ask why the dispersal of indentured labor – Indian, Chinese, Japanese to remote parts of the globe in the nineteenth century is not customarily written into the history of globalization.

It is possible to argue, of course, that the present interest in the Indian diaspora owes a great deal to a concatenation of circumstances. Until quite recently, the prevailing sociological framework insisted upon categories such as migration, emigration, and immigration, and the bulk of the scholarly effort was devoted to an understanding of how immigrant communities assimilated into the host country. For a variety of reasons, not least of which is the fact that immigration studies pointed largely to a centripetal view of host societies, so much so that the reigning metaphor for America as an immigrant society was “the melting pot”, the term “diaspora” came into usage as a preferred term to describe the shifting focus towards immigrant societies as comprised of diasporic peoples whose histories radiated outwards as much as inwards. In the revised model, diasporic people bore a centrifugal relationship to their adopted land, and insofar as there were any centripetal tendencies to their thinking, they revolved around the construction of the land of their origin as a spiritual home. Moreover, though the term “diaspora” was itself understood as bearing, in its primal usage, a precise reference to the dispersal of the Jewish people, there emerged a widespread feeling that the history of various communities – Palestinians, Chinese, Armenians, Indians, among others – outside their traditional homeland could not be conceived except in the language of diaspora. In the era of globalization, the notion of “diaspora” was performed among the first to be globalized.<sup>3</sup>

Quite apart from the fact that diasporic studies began to fuel interest in the Indian diaspora, there is the consideration that the diaspora's own histories were beginning to take on different shapes and hues. Not until the late 1980s did the term “NRI”, the Non-Resident Indian, become ubiquitous enough in middle-class homes and government policy documents alike that it required no explanation and little commentary. So long as “overseas Indians”, as diasporic Indians were generally known, were largely confined to Fiji, Mauritius, Guyana, Malaysia, and other parts of the under-developed and developing world, the Indian government showed little enthusiasm in viewing them as Indians, or creating a special niche for them in Indian society. Successive governments appeared to subscribe to the views

articulated by Jawaharlal Nehru, who espoused the view that overseas Indians were best calculated to serve their own interests, and safeguard their achievements and gains, by partaking in the political life of the country that they had adopted as their home. They could make no substantive claims on India. That was the position taken by Nehru when, as the country's Prime Minister, he was petitioned by Indians who faced eviction from Burma [now Myanmar]. In the defense of the Indian government's position, one might plausibly argue that these Indians of the older diaspora had ceased to have any living connection with India, though this is in any case much less true of what was then Burma's Indian population, but in truth the Indian government was scarcely positioned to intervene when overseas Indians were subject to discrimination and outright racism. Thus the government could do nothing to prevent the expulsion of Indians from Kenya and Uganda, and even with respect to Fiji, where the Indians exercised a slim numerical majority until quite recently, the Indian government was incapable of anything more than a toothless response to the coup of 1987, which resulted in the first substantial exodus of Indians to Australia, New Zealand, Britain, and North America. Expulsion of a country from the Commonwealth not only received no attention in most of the Western media, but was calculated to elicit derisive remarks about the irrelevance of the Commonwealth to the course of global politics.

By the mid-1980s, however, the term NRI was beginning to come into vogue, and this transpired not because the Indian government, or the Indian public, were suddenly and inexplicably awakened to the presence of large Indian populations in many countries of the South. For one thing, the passage of the Immigration and Naturalization Act in 1965 once again opened those doors to Indians that were shut in the 1920s (Lal, 1999b), and in twenty years a generation of educated Indians had established a name for themselves in the various professions across the United States. In India, Rajiv Gandhi's ascendancy to power held out the promise that geriatric bureaucrats and Nehruvian socialists would be sent into retirement, and the future of the country delivered into the hands of technocrats, entrepreneurs, and other so-called visionaries who were known to be sympathetic to ideas to jump-start India into the computer age and, as it was commonly put then, bypass the bullock cart and the spinning wheel. Rajiv Gandhi's selection of Sam Pitroda as his Chief Advisor on matters of technology in 1987 marked the moment of the NRI's triumphant entry into the discursive formation of Indian modernity.<sup>4</sup> Having made a name for himself in the field of telecommunications in the US, Pitroda, who first came to the US in the mid-1960s to earn a higher degree in electrical engineering, returned to India in the early 1980s. Only 3 percent of India's villages at that time had telephone service. The hagiographic accounts describe Pitroda, who also assumed the Chairmanship of the Telephone Commission, as fired by the vision to see India linked telephonically, and the yellow STD-ISD phone booths which now dot the entire country are said to be the consequence of Pitroda's aggressive drive to implement a technological revolution in Indian society.<sup>5</sup>

The trends set into motion by Rajiv Gandhi were accelerated under successive political administrations, and as the liberalization of the economy became enshrined as official economic policy, the NRI was viewed as the most likely source of direct foreign investment in India. The older Indian diasporic populations were, by contrast, seen as liabilities, as ugly reminders of the country's servitude under the British.<sup>6</sup> However, as Pitroda's story suggests, much else would be invested in the figure of the Non-Resident Indian. If the idea of the diaspora has always entailed the idea of the return to the homeland, Pitroda was the true diasporic or non-resident Indian who, not forgetting his roots, had returned to serve the motherland. Non-resident Indians had to be envisioned as something of a revolutionary vanguard; they also furnished the country's lifeline to the immense changes being wrought in the North by the information superhighway and other forms of technological wizardry. Non-resident Indians would, consequently, themselves become the very instantiation of globalization, indeed, in many middle-class homes in India, figures of nearly mythic proportions. The matrimonial section of the Sunday edition of the major English dailies reflected this changing reality, creating a new column for "Green Card holders", with the obvious implication that green card men would be able to command higher dowries, while green card women, with their earning potential, were themselves a form of dowry for an Indian groom. The NRI, unlike the "overseas Indian" of earlier generations, has arrived; he belongs to the developed, not the developing, world; and in him cannot be writ large the oppressive narrative of development, which condemns those who belong to the developing world to always, but always, arrive late at their destination. Just how much the NRI marks the triumphant emergence of the Indian diaspora as a factor on the world stage can be gauged by the fact that the Indian government has finally conceded, if only in principle, the demand for dual citizenship; but while allowing this concession, it has, through a set of stringent requirements, effectively shut out from this privilege diasporic Indians not settled in the industrialized nations of the North.

One can be entirely certain, indeed, that were it not for the NRI, a term which, as I have suggested, works on two different registers, the Indian Government could scarcely have been bothered with convening a large gathering of influential diasporic Indians in New Delhi earlier this year. The previous occasion when the Indian government, then the vehicle of colonialist policies, legislated in any truly significant way to regulate its relationship to the Indian diaspora was in 1917 when the entire system of indentured labor, which had already gone into decline, was brought to a complete halt. There have, of course, been numerous occasions when the Indian government has sought to monitor the movement of Indian labor, most particularly to the Gulf countries, and twice, in 1990-91 and 2003, it has repatriated Indians from Iraq and Kuwait at its own expense. But diasporic Indians in Trinidad, Surinam, Mauritius, South Africa and elsewhere have never labored under the illusion that the Indian Government had any substantive interest in their welfare, or was keen on embracing them as Indians who had strayed far from their

home. All over the non-NRI Indian diaspora, there is considerable speculation on what prompts mother India at this particular juncture to make its children cling to its bosom.

That the Indian Government chose to inaugurate Pravasi [emigrant] Bharatiya Diwas on 9 January 2003 should not go unnoticed. On January 9<sup>th</sup>, 1915, Mohandas Gandhi, not then the Mahatma, returned to India after a long stint in South Africa. The rest, as the *cliché* goes, is history; and yet, as is true of all histories, much is also occluded in the conventional narratives. The bulk of the indentured laborers who arrived on the shores of South Africa, Guyana, Surinam, Trinidad, Jamaica, Fiji, Malaysia, and Mauritius could scarcely exercise the choice of returning to India; some, who had never traveled more than a few kilometers from their village in the hinterland, were even unaware that they were leaving India. There is ample evidence of people deceived into believing that they were being taken to places where land was plentiful, where with earnest labor savings could be accumulated and a return to one's own homeland be undertaken at the end of the contractual period, which was usually five years (Tinker, 1974; Cumpston, 1969). Gandhi, by contrast, chose to make his living in South Africa, and during his long sojourn there, extending over two decades, he journeyed across the oceans to India and Britain more than once. Not to speak of Gandhi's own time, even a century later entire generations of Indo-Fijians and Indo-Trinidadians know India only through Tulsidas's *Ramacaritmanas* and Bollywood, remarkably and not inaptly placed in apposition, and have no first-hand familiarity with the country of their origin, or what is described as their origin. Though I would scarcely belittle the social knowledge generated by these two unique artifacts of the Indian sensibility, the point remains that Gandhi, as he criss-crossed the oceans, prefigured the more recent Indian diaspora that makes its home in the industrial West than the diaspora that originated, to invoke Hugh Tinker, as another form of slavery.

But it is for more than this reason that the embrace of the moment of Gandhi's return by the present Indian government is supremely troubling. Among Indian governments since independence was acquired in 1947, none has harbored more assassins of Gandhi's memory than the present government, and none has been more sympathetic to Gandhi's killers. No amount of prevarication can conceal this brutally unpleasant fact, and the recent installation in the Indian Parliament of the portrait of Vinayak Damodar ("Veer") Savarkar, who was charged with conspiring to murder Gandhi but acquitted for lack of evidence, is not merely testimony to the disdain in which Gandhi, the so-called "Father of the Nation", is held by the political elites of the ruling party, but evidence of their confidence that over time the memory of Gandhi can be altogether excised. Savarkar's portrait now hangs opposite that of Gandhi, but the time may not be far removed when his portrait alone will remain. Nathuram Godse's patrons in the former Hindu Mahasabha and the RSS stalk the corridors of power, and the Bharatiya Janata Party's ideological allies include parties and organizations, such as the Shiv Sena and the Bajrang Dal,

whose contempt for Gandhi is not even disguised. The Bajrang Dal celebrates January 30<sup>th</sup> as the occasion when “Mahatma Nathuram Godse” showed his Hindu brothers and sisters the path to martyrdom, and put before them the ultimate example of courage and wisdom, by doing away with the life of “Duratma Mohandas Gandhi”. As the recent press release of HinduUnity.Org says in its panegyric to Godse, “We will be indebted to him forever because some of us know that we would either be dead today or converted to Islam if it wasn't for the removal of this poisonous thorn [Gandhi] that could have continued to the irreversible damage to the welfare of the Hindu people.”<sup>7</sup> A deep hatred for Gandhi, who is seen as a bumbling old fool who emasculated the Hindu nation by his insistence on non-violence, and embraced feminine practices of fasting, spinning, prayer, and listening to the “inner voice”, animates the thinking of Hindutva ideologues. Thus, when the Indian Government conducted its nuclear tests in May 1998, and that too on the occasion of Buddha Purnima [Birth Anniversary], the clear intent was not only to signify to the world India's prowess, but to lay to rest the spectre of Gandhi.

If, as I have suggested, the NRI is the very instantiation of the idea of globalization, then the ironies are further compounded when we consider that no one in our times has had a more far-reaching critique of a globalized world than Gandhi in whose name, so to speak, the Pravasi Bharatiya Diwas was staged. One marvels at the fact that the special supplement on the Indian diaspora jointly published on the occasion of the Diwas by *Asian Voice* and *Gujarat Samachar*, the magazines with the largest circulation among Britain's Indian communities, features an article, without so much as a trace of irony or recognition of the absurdity of the claim, entitled “Gandhi The greatest NRI ever” (Anon, 2003). The cover reinforces the representation of a Indian diaspora globalized as much by the peregrinations and presence of Gandhi as much as by anything else: the NRI, as the cartographic strategy suggests, is on the forward move. Globalization flattens the world; but even its critics, who resolutely oppose the homogenization of the world's cultures, endorse the idea of what might be called “one world”. The very commitment to the United Nations that liberals display stems precisely from the sentiment that a system of global governance, if it could only be rid of the zero-sum view of politics that manifestly guides the conduct of nation-states, is best calculated to produce one world. No one understood better than Gandhi that the idea of “one world” would be predicated on Western universalisms, and that such universalisms would continue to derive their sustenance from their purportedly heroic opposition to non-European or indigenous particularisms. Early on in his life, as *Hind Swaraj* a text dated to 1909, and one to which Gandhi would remain attached for the rest of his life amply demonstrates, Gandhi came to the realization that oppression would increasingly be exercised in the name of categories such as “development”, “growth”, and “the international community” derived from Western knowledge systems. Gandhi anticipated, then, the most substantive critique of globalization, one that even today is less frequently understood: nothing

has been as effectively globalized as the knowledge systems of the West and the intellectual categories derived from the academic disciplines that are now the mainstay of institutionalized knowledge (Lal, 2002).

That the most radical rebel of modern history should have been transformed into something as banal as the NRI is suggestive of the profound ambiguities attendant upon the "triumph", if one may call it that, of the recent Indian diaspora. Evidence of the Indianization of the globe, as I have commented previously, appears everywhere, and the widespread and rapidly increasing diffusion of Indian cuisine, the film music of Bollywood, classical North Indian music, diasporic Indian literature, yoga and other manifestations of real and supposed Hindu spirituality, and Indian fashions such as the *bindi* and *henna* tell part of the story; the other part of the narrative is told through the familiar figures of Indian doctors, computer engineers, information technology specialists, statisticians, Wall Street bankers, venture capitalists, and let us not forget the Gujaratis who have established their presence as merchants, shopkeepers, traders, and businessmen of vast affluence. However, that I should speak of "Indian cuisine" in the singular is telling, since *Indianization of cultural practices and norms can only operate within the discursive formations of globalization*. The globalization of Indian cuisine demanded that all Indian cuisine be reduced to a generally generic form of North Indian tandoori cooking, though doubtless more sophisticated consumers will increasingly veer towards the lesser known variants of Indian cooking. The same phenomenon is witnessed in the domain of classical Indian dance: though there are several different schools or styles of dance, in the West Bharat Natyam predominates. Classical Indian music exhibits the same tendency in the West: instrumentalists such as Ravi Shankar gained with relative ease a considerable following, but vocalists, from Amir Khan to Veena Sahasrabudde, whose music is vastly more demanding for untutored ears, command much smaller audiences.

The ambivalence of this triumph of "Indianization" of cultural phenomena is equally writ large in the NRI's disposition towards Gandhi. As Gandhi's worldwide reputation from the 1920s onwards, and the complex manner in which he has been appropriated by astonishingly diverse constituencies, from nudists, vegetarians, naturopaths, and radical exponents of deep ecology to anarchists, civil rights activists, human rights campaigners, non-violent resisters, and even corporate firms such as Apple Computers, unequivocally suggests, Gandhi himself became globalized. To speak of Gandhi, as Nehru once remarked, was to speak of India. Yet, to the Indian middle class, and to its affluent NRI representatives in the US, Canada, and other spheres of the North, Gandhi had long become a figure of supreme irrelevance. Of course, as in India itself, it has become important in the NRI diaspora to install Gandhi's statues, encourage Indian schoolchildren to pen essays on Gandhi's relevance, and invite Congressmen in the US House of Representatives who casually vote for war resolutions to pontificate on the moral message of the Mahatma's teachings,<sup>8</sup> but no one who has observed the wide approbation with which India's nuclear tests were received by Indian communities



in the US can doubt that Gandhi is viewed with complete indifference if not disdain as the sign of everything that India must renounce if it is to achieve respectability in the modern nation-state system. Though many of the NRIs despise Gandhi's disavowal of nation-state politics and his repudiation of big science and lifestyles associated with "industrial civilization", they are also cognizant of the fact that Gandhi gives India a credibility and spiritual aura that nations envy, and his name furnishes one of the most important and conspicuous links to India for people who are otherwise ignorant of Indian history and politics. However critical they may be of Gandhi, a backward villager and lover of Muslims, the foe of Hindus, indeed the very 'Father of Pakistan' -- in the presence of other Indians, few would allow themselves to look as anything but his most ardent admirers to the outside world. Thus seminars on the "relevance of Gandhi" are perennial favorites among those committed to war, the money-making classes, and those who might be styled spin doctors and political opportunists; they are certainly a relatively inexpensive way to earn cultural capital, not entirely unlike the numerous peace summits that the US, the world's largest manufacturer and exporter of heavy and small arms, not to mention its long and unmatched history of militaristic adventurism, holds from time to time.

The extraordinary ambivalence underlying the NRI disposition towards Gandhi points still yet to a larger narrative. *A profound anxiety of influence pervades the Indian diasporic communities of the North at the very moment when India seems poised to insert itself into the nexus of world culture.* The sources and manifestations of this anxiety are numerous, but it will suffice to take note of some of the more salient ones. Though in the United States, which now houses the most sizeable Indian diasporic population in the world, Indians have done spectacularly well, and exercise a hugely disproportionate influence on the professions, the feeling that they remain invisible persists. A staple feature of local Indian newspapers are the pages enumerating the names and accomplishments of Indians raised to the ranks of Rhodes or Marshall Scholars, or otherwise victorious as winners of spelling bees.<sup>9</sup> But these celebrations are not long-lasting, for their minimal political presence comes back to haunt Indians. Only one Indian, Dilip Singh Saund, has ever served in the US Congress, and that a time, from 1956 to 1962, when the Indian community was of no consequence, numbering in the few thousands. Even in state-wide offices and state legislatures, Indian representation is extremely poor. While pleased that they are regarded as a model minority, a term whose politics the Indian community naively accepts as innocent, as a correct representation of what a minority can achieve if it sheds off the laziness and sneering habits of the black community, Indians nonetheless are pained at their political insignificance.

The anguish of diasporic Indians extends much further to the thought that the world rides roughshod over India. A country with a billion-strong population should be deserving of more respect; for its size, India is doubtless the most unimportant country in the world. Let me illustrate this argument with a recent

example: as *the Indian Express* reported in a prominent headline on 10 March 2003, "270 Indians 'beaten up' by police in Malaysia." Apparently this large number of Indians, almost all information technology professionals, were rounded up on the pretext that they were working without valid documents; many were kicked and slapped and imprisoned overnight; their passports were defaced before they were released the following day. The response of one reader to this story can be described as representative, and I quote: "India continues to be perceived as a poverty stricken nation with most people below the poverty line and average IQ level. As a NRI, I can emphatically state that we have not grown out of our Snake Charmer's image. Will Malaysia dare do this to the Chinese or Japanese? ... let us forget [not to speak of] the West."<sup>10</sup>

To be an Indian is to extend an invitation to the world to trample upon oneself. Here, too, this pervasive anxiety stems from a wide array of considerations, only a few of which can be entertained at present. There is, to begin with, much resentment over the fact that China, a "communist" regime, appears to receive far more attention in American political and diplomatic circles than India. Diasporic Indians express incomprehension over the American preoccupation with China when, from their standpoint, the largest democracy in the world is clearly the more fitting partner for an alliance with the world's most advanced democracy. Those familiar with the apparatus of Asian studies in American universities will at once also recognize the fact that China (and Japan) absolutely dominate the conception of what constitutes "Asia". The reasons why this is the case need not detain us, varying as they do from the fact that the Chinese and Japanese established their presence on American soil well before the Indians did so, to the consideration that Japan has been, through much of the twentieth century, a political or economic power. India, all of South Asia, is only marginal to American considerations. The extraordinary fanfare over Jiang Zemin's visit to the US during the Clinton presidency is contrasted with the low-key reception given to Atal Behari Vajpayee, and *India-West* and *India Abroad*, to mention two of the well-known newspapers of the Indo-American diaspora, meticulously document the slightest signs of any favors conferred upon the Indian government, such as the consent given by the Joint Chiefs of Staff to meet with an Indian Army General on a visit to the US. These signs are supposed to represent India's growing standing in the world. Recent articles in these and similar newspapers have expressed unreserved enthusiasm over Henry Kissinger's apparent proclamation that India ought to be viewed as a major world power, and the mention of India in the New National Security Strategy of the United States (September 2002) is adduced with evident pride as proof of the respect that India is gaining in American political circles. Needless to say, such obsequiousness finds nothing amiss in receiving the approbation of criminals with delight, and the surrender to realpolitik is viewed as the necessary condition of increased cooperation with the US.

Troubling as diasporic Indians find the American ambivalence over China, a country whose political shortcomings are apparently overlooked with ease as it

becomes the world's preeminent manufacturer of consumer goods, they rankle at the fact that Pakistan, a military dictatorship for a good bit of its history, seems to be on a more or less equal footing with India in American foreign policy. The immensely popular internet portal, Rediff.com, which has a large following among diasporic professionals, regularly hosts political commentators and former Indian army officers, many now settled in the US, who advocate punitive and decisive military action against Pakistan. As the former director of counter terrorism at RAW [Research and Analysis Wing], the spy agency of the Indian Government, wrote in a recent piece entitled "Stop barking, start biting", the Indian government must display steely determination in its endeavor to fight Islamic terrorism, or otherwise India will "continue to totter from one pan-Islamic bloodbath to another" (Raman, 2002). It is easy enough to argue that affluent diasporic Indians can embrace the military option without much thought since they scarcely have to suffer any consequences. The obvious merit of this observation should not, however, obscure the deep anxiety of influence which, as I have argued, informs diasporic Indians' views of Pakistan, and their complete incomprehension that a two-bit state which is the sponsor of terrorism in South Asia and a failure by any yardstick should be spoken of in the same breath as India. India's diplomatic failures, much like other political events such as the coups in Fiji, the most recent one in 2000 that overthrew a democratically elected government headed by an Indo-Fijian, are all viewed as reflections of the inability of the Indian nation-state to flex its muscles overseas. Thus the argument is advanced that if India wishes to make itself heard in the world, it shall have to do a great deal more than export its cultural products, yoga, samosas, and gurus.

Cultural capital, evidently, can only go so far. However much they may welcome the Indianization of the globe, NRIs Indians would much rather have the world view India with some fear and respect. The keenness with which NRIs pursue the prospects of India's admission to the Security Council as a permanent member, a gesture which, if it were ever to materialize, would doubtless incur the opposition of Pakistan and perhaps China, can be adduced as a notable example of the ambition to see, in the words of the NRI economist Romesh Diwan, "India ascendant."<sup>11</sup> The US-India Political Action Committee's online petition, which calls upon viewers to "Support India for Permanent Membership of the UN Security Council", takes note of India's "ancient civilization", its role as a "major player" [?] in curbing the spread of nuclear weapons, its vast and growing economy, and its strategic location in Asia.<sup>12</sup> The petition gives much prominence to the fulminations of *New York Times'* Thomas Friedman (2003), who, following France's insistence that only a second Security Council resolution would authorize the world community to wage war upon Iraq, had advocated that India be offered a permanent place on the Council in lieu of France; it also quotes, with obvious relish, the observation by the conservative ideologue, Charles Krauthammer (2003), that "as soon as the dust settles in Iraq, we should push for an expansion of the Security Council -- with India and Japan as new permanent members -- to

dilute France's disproportionate and anachronistic influence." In a similar vein is an article by Mukesh Advani<sup>13</sup>, President of the Northern California-based South Asian Bar Association, whose case for India's permanent membership in the Security Council also enumerates India's "vast pool of technicians and scientists", its "huge strides in the Space technologies", and its status in the "third world" as a country providing "moral leadership." The apposition of "huge", "large", and "moral" comes effortlessly: if the United States is the paradigmatic instantiation of the justness of this alignment, why should India be viewed any differently? Moreover, in anticipation of the argument that a country where malnutrition afflicts 50 percent of the population, and the literacy rate among women in some districts is less than 10 percent more than 50 years after independence, scarcely deserves permanent membership in the world's most elite political body, the author advances the view that "India being the sufferers [sic] of these evils can contribute a great [sic] towards formulating a workable approach at the UN on these issues."<sup>13</sup> These frequent discussions, heard with rapidly increasing frequency over the last year, in the diasporic Indian press on India's entitlement to a permanent seat in the UN Security Council all take place without the slightest thought given to whether the Security Council is itself not an emphatic repudiation of the democratic process that the United Nations was supposed to embody. In this matter as in most others, the slightest evidence of support for India's claim in Western capitals is pounced upon with much relish, and Friedman's aforementioned article has lovingly been circulated by the Indian government among all its diplomatic missions. In the last analysis, India's famed beauty queens and the heaving bosoms of Bollywood films are at best a distraction from power.

But Pakistan is more than just an irritant, a country that, thankfully, has never been viewed as a prospective candidate for permanent Security Council membership. Pakistan is also, if a reminder were necessary, a preeminently Islamic state, indeed, in middle-class Indian thinking, a theocratic state. For that very reason, it is both despised and secretly admired: despised because as residents of one democracy, howsoever pathetic a democracy, NRIs must perforce declare their opposition to a state which fails to recognize the separation of religion and politics. Islam, I need not add, is viewed as particularly retrograde, a religion that is shaped by a conviction that, to quote again the observations of a former official of the espionage agency RAW, "it cannot coexist with other religions and that to kill in the interests of Islam and the *Shariat* is a religious obligation and not a sin, even if the killing involves the use of weapons of mass destruction" (Raman, 2002). But Islam, unlike Hinduism, at least attracts the attention of the world; and NRI-Hindus, and the large middle-class population in India from which they largely derive their numbers, crave attention. To be a Hindu is nearly to be condemned to oblivion; it is to be relegated to the space that Dante described as limbo, to which are confined those who deserve neither praise nor blame. Once in a rare while a Jerry Falwell or a Pat Robertson comes along, declaring that Hinduism is the religion of Satan; but Falwell, Robertson, and their ilk among evangelical

Christians hold similar views about Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism, and after a little excitement, indignation, and outrage their views are forgotten. About the only kind of attention Hinduism has otherwise received in the US, for instance, is through the Hare Krishnas, who not long ago made their presence felt at airports and other public places where they would gather, and who, quite unknown to most Indians and Americans alike, have gone to court explicitly in the endeavor to have Krsnaism declared a separate faith from Hinduism. So those who are supremely iconic of Hinduism in the American imagination disavow the description of "Hindus" by which others know them.

The invisibility of Hinduism may be a source of anguish, but it is also something in which, admittedly, at least some NRIs take pleasure. Religion is, understandably, viewed as a private matter by these NRIs, and so the silence enveloping Hinduism in the US is tolerated; on the other hand, many diasporic Hindus hold to the view that the obscurity surrounding Hinduism leaves it without protections available to more organized and visible religions. Among the most prominent organizations now in the vanguard to safeguard Hinduism against the depredations of fanatics and corporate interests is one that styles itself "American Hindus Against Defamation" (AHAD). AHAD has warned that one of a series of "Trash Talker Dolls" created by a Florida toy company, which features "Mr. Patel", could incite anti-Indian and anti-Hindu sentiments (Tsering, 2002).<sup>14</sup> Among the utterances of "Mr. Patel" is this line, "Hamburger. Everything on it, please, but no beef",<sup>15</sup> a stereotype that feeds on what is to Americans a vaguely known sentiment that Hindus hold the cow in veneration and abjure from the consumption of beef. "Mr. Patel", alarmingly, sports a turban, which to AHAD suggests that Hindus Patel being most often a Hindu name, and in the US always a name which evokes images of motels are being conflated with Muslims, and most particularly with terrorists of the Osama bin Laden variety.

In the last two years, AHAD has been unusually busy, conducting vigorous campaigns against a number of companies charged with the exploitation of Hindu deities and the profanation of the Hindu faith. Their wrath has fallen upon the kitchen and bath appliances company Kohler, which released a glossy advertisement of a scantily-clad woman with four arms and a raised right leg who is clearly a representation of Nataraja, the dancing Shiva (Swapan, 2002), the West Coast microbrewery Lost Coast which produced an Indian pale ale that carried Ganesh's picture on the front,<sup>16</sup> and most recently American Eagle Outfitters for marketing flip flops with images of Ganesh on the sole.<sup>17</sup> One might well agree that a foot placed on a sole bearing the image of a deity represents a gross insult to Hinduism, but since when did Hindu deities become so fragile? One suspects that "American Hindus" are not familiar with the large canvas of Indian literature known as the Puranas, which ought to be the heritage of everyone who purports to describe himself or herself as a Hindu, and which are ecumenical enough to entertain conceptions of Hindu deities who are often given over to erotic, playful, and even perverse activities. In Indian cities, it has even become something of a

well-known ploy to paint large images of Hindu deities on well-traversed public pavements and footpaths, and then entice people to step around these images and throw money on them. In their haste people do sometimes trample upon these images, and must then make nominal monetary amends. Yet none of this induces any degree of self-reflection among “American Hindus”.

AHAD’s most spectacular campaign to date has been against the toilet seat manufacturer Sittin’ Pretty, which placed images of Shiva, Kali, and Ganesh on toilet seat covers (Sundaram, 2000a). AHAD contends that Hindu images, which are “cool” and popular among followers of Semitic faiths who may well be starved of images of the divine, are assumed to be public property,<sup>18</sup> and that the reverence extended to other religions is entirely wanting in the American experience of Hinduism. AHAD’s convenor, Ajay Shah, has described the toilet seat covers as “an outrageously insensitive use of Hindu symbolism” (Anon, 2000:40): Hindu images may be “cool”, but, evidently, one can also, so to speak, shit on them. “Little did we know”, AHAD’s website states apropos of the toilet seats planted with images of Hindu deities, “that there is no limit to how low can one sink when it comes to the depiction of revered Hindu images.”<sup>19</sup> AHAD is at a loss to explain why, if Hinduism appears to bear the burden of commercial obscenities, Sittin’ Pretty should also have placed the Holy Mary on one of its toilet seat covers. True, the manufacturer appears not to have placed an image of the Holy Mary cover on its website, but it can also be argued that to the manufacturer all divine images are fair game. What could have been a critique of the relentless logic of the market becomes, in AHAD’s hands, resentment over the base treatment that is apparently reserved for Hindus and their faith. That Sittin’ Pretty can so casually place Hindu deities on its toilet seat covers is an expression not necessarily of contempt for Hinduism, but more so of the fact that categories such as “reverence” and “sacred” have lost much of their purchase under conditions of modernity. What AHAD needs to be engaged with here is a critique of modernity and market-place morality, but this is much too difficult: its own frame of reference is furnished by the very institutions and cultural practices that devolve from modernity, such as the idea of demanding a political apology. AHAD demanded, and received, an apology from Sittin’ Pretty, whose co-owner, Lamar van Dyke, described “our beloved Goddess Kali” and “Lord Ganesh” as deities to whom “we feel personally close”, adding: “We meant neither harm nor insult, and apologize to the Hindus of the world for unintentionally upsetting them” (Sundaram, 2000b). Little does AHAD realize that an epidemic of apologies has engulfed us, and that “apology” itself has become a category of market-place morality (Lal, 1999a).

It is perfectly reasonable for people to become agitated if they believe that their religious sentiments have been violated or profaned, and crass commercial exploitation of religious icons and beliefs is to be at least as much deplored as the naked use of religion in the service of political extremism. Doubtless, some absurd defense of Sittin’ Pretty’s rights of free expression of speech and artistic license is not inconceivable, but Sittin’ Pretty will find few defenders. Still, one must ask

how “defamation” came to be an operative category for Hindus, just as one must probe those who would deploy the category of “blasphemy” to describe offences committed against Hinduism. Whatever moral charge there may be in the term “defamation”, it is today preeminently a legal category, and Hinduism’s defenders have consistently maintained that matters of religious belief are outside the purview of the legal system. By way of example, consider that though the dispute over the “origins” of the now-destroyed Babri Masjid has been placed under the jurisdiction of India’s Supreme Court, the ideologues of Hindutva have time after time declared that Hinduism’s “truths” cannot be legislated, and that the decision of the court will not be binding upon Hindus. There is also the consideration that Hinduism, which has managed reasonably well without vigorous defenders in the diaspora, now has an alarming number of aggressive votaries in the West. One should not merely marvel, but tremble, at the fact that in its wisdom, the Federation of Hindu Associations, a US-based umbrella organization, conferred one of its recent annual “Hindu of the Year” awards upon the Shiv Sena leader Bal Thackeray, who has openly declared his admiration for Hitler and deploys Nazi-like tactics to terrorize various non-Maharashtrian communities (Hansen, 2002), and Sadhvi Ritambhara, whose public speeches caricaturize Muslims as castrated men and eunuchs (Kakar, 1995:197-214). The citation accompanying the award commended Thackeray for his defense of the Hindu faith against the evil-minded. Readers would have been reminded of the fact that Vishnu from time to time sends incarnations to save the world from the wicked.

The existence of “American Hindus Against Defamation” and other similar organizations is evidence not, as is commonly supposed, of the belated awareness that Hinduism is as much entitled to protection as any other religion, but of a profound anxiety at the heart of militantly resurgent Hinduism. In the world-view of those who style themselves advocates of Hindutva, Hinduism is not quite a proper religion, and certainly not a world religion. It is not merely the case that, until the migrations of the nineteenth century, Hinduism was confined almost exclusively to South Asia, barring those periods when Hinduism was transmitted to large parts of Southeast Asia. Even in Vietnam, Java, Cambodia, and Thailand, where Hindu dynasties once prevailed, Hinduism survives not as a living faith, but as a set of cultural practices and as the repository of literary traditions and mythological motifs. The Hinduism of the Javanese is a profound phenomenon, one that few Hindus recognize, and the shadow plays and dances of the Javanese are predominantly populated by stories drawn from the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, and the vast mythic lore of Puranic Hinduism; and yet the Javanese remain resolutely Muslim. By “world religion”, however, I obviously wish to convey a great deal more, since most Hindus themselves do not view Hinduism as having a worldwide appeal in the manner of Christianity and Islam. Many commentators have spoken of the masculinization of Hinduism in recent years; others have described what might be termed “the semitic turn” in Hinduism. The Hinduism of its most militant advocates, it is alleged, seeks to emulate the Semitic

faiths, such that Tulsidas's *Ramacaritmanas* (or, perhaps, the Bhagavad Gita) becomes the preeminent book of the Hindus, a people among whom no one book is supremely authoritative; similarly, the elevation of Rama, and the intent focus on Ayodhya as his supposed birthplace, are described as being indicative of the tendency to furnish Hinduism with a single messiah, and the historical specificity, that the religion is said to lack.

The literature here is prolific, and there is something substantive to be said for some of these interpretive moves. The analogy with Semitism is much less than perfect, as even a rudimentary analysis of Hindutva's multiple political agendas suggests, besides having other disturbing implications that one might wish to disown: the critics of the "Semitic turn", one might plausibly argue, have rendered the Semitic faiths into monolithic constructs. Christianity is witnessing its most rapid expansion in Africa, but if Hindutva's ideologues are religious bigots, they are also racial-minded, and in this respect at least they are inclined to see Christianity, which must find new converts in the "dark continent", as a faith on the wane. Quite considerable, then, are the difficulties with viewing Hinduism's turn towards Hindutva as an emulation of the Semitic faiths, though the attraction of Islam for Hindutva, as I have previously suggested, is not to be underestimated, even though it can never be publicly admitted. At the same time, it would be difficult to overstate the intensely masculinist metaphors of Thackeray's public discourses, the glorification of martial values in Hindutva writings, the unabashed celebration of virility as a virtue without which nation-states cannot thrive, and the openly chauvinist and patriarchal leanings of Hindutva ideologues and their supporters. It serves some purpose, consequently, to speak of the aspiration of Hinduism's most vigorous votaries to be a proper as well as world religion. As a polycentric, polymorphous, and polyphonic religion, Hinduism is the very picture of chaos. Thus, to take one example, it becomes imperative in Hindutva thinking to disown the legendary "330 million gods and goddesses of Hinduism" and to suggest that one god lurks behind all these apparitions; Hinduism, in other words, is just as monotheistic as the semitic faiths. Moreover, if nation-states get the religion that they deserve, then it is apposite that a soft nation-state such as India should be the home to the softest religion on earth. Should one be surprised that Hindutva has flourished under the dispensation of the Bharatiya Janata Party, and that the same party, in one of its first deeds after it came to office, openly transformed India into a nuclear state?

At this present juncture of history, as I have argued, the Indian diaspora gives rise to uncertainties even as it celebrates its accomplishments and revels at diverse signs of the Indianization of the globe. I have placed at the center of my argument the idea that a pervasive *anxiety of influence* is attendant upon the engagement of middle-class, modernizing Indians, especially Non-resident Indians (NRIs), with the world. Studies of the Indian diaspora (especially in the affluent North), as well as of Hinduism, have been indifferent to, indeed oblivious of, such considerations, but this may, perhaps, be one of the more productive ways to gain a grasp over the



complex issues that have come to the fore with the advent of globalization. What some commentators have described as the “Semitic turn” in militant Hinduism might, with greater justice, be described as the “turn towards globalization” a turn that is aimed at homogenizing Hinduism, transforming it into a world religion, and placing it within categories of knowledge that would make it into a proper religion. Whether Hinduism will resist this onslaught is a story whose outcome remains to be seen.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>. I owe the lovely phrase “Balti Britain” to Ziauddin Sardar. “Balti” restaurants have proliferated over the last decade. Though ‘balti’ in Hindustani refers to a bucket, used in the bathroom and toilet, it is alleged that balti cuisine takes its name from Baltistan in northern Pakistan. It is noteworthy that Indian food has even been served at a state dinner at Buckingham Palace.

<sup>2</sup>. This gathering, which took place in New Delhi in January 2003, is known as ‘Pravasi Bharatiya Divas’; see below for further discussion.

<sup>3</sup>. Every nuanced contribution to the literature on diasporas seems to show awareness of the difficulties attendant upon deploying the term ‘diaspora’, and this awareness is all that is called for at this juncture.

<sup>4</sup>. As Advisor to the Prime Minister, Pitroda held the rank of minister on national technology missions.

<sup>5</sup>. There are over 600,000 such public calling offices or booths in the country, furnishing employment to over 1 million people.

<sup>6</sup>. That indentured labor followed the abolition of slavery in British territories, and that Indians came to stand in for Negro populations, were facts that would, in the hands of most historians, rapidly slide into oblivion.

<sup>7</sup>. The website of the Bajrang Dal and Youth Wing of the VHP, <http://www.hinduunity.org>, marked January 30<sup>th</sup> as “Mahatma Nathuram Godse Diwas”. “Mahatma” is rendered into English as “great soul”; “Duratma” means “the wicked one”. More recently, the website enjoins viewers to “Celebrate Shri Nathuram Godse's Birth on May 19<sup>th</sup>”, and urges them to “send a message to the enemies of humanity that we will fight and even die to protect the basic principles of Hinduism.” The site goes on to describe Gandhi “as a downright PACIFIST, without guts and SCRUPLES. His constant preaching to his fellow Hindus, to be nonviolent at all times, EVEN IN THE FACE OF AGGRESSION, paralyzed the manhood of India, mentally and physically.” See <http://www.hinduunity.org>

<sup>8</sup>. See, for example, the three pages of coverage on Gandhi-related events in and around Chicago in the *Indian Reporter* (11 October 2002), pp. 27-29. “Gandhian thought still relevant” (p. 27) furnishes some details of a conference held at the University of Chicago where the Indian Consul-General, Chicago, provided introductory remarks; the following two pages host an article by Jatinder Singh Bedi, “Gandhi statue unveiled in Milwaukee.”

<sup>9</sup>. A not inconsiderable portion of the community life of Indians revolves around these spelling bees, in which Indians have acquitted themselves very well. The 1985, 1988, 1999, 2000, 2002, and 2003 national championships were won by Indians.

<sup>10</sup>. Comment online at: [http://www.indianexpress.com/messages.php?content\\_id=19870#697](http://www.indianexpress.com/messages.php?content_id=19870#697)

<sup>11</sup>. Online at <http://www.sulekha.com/column.asp?cid=298065> As of 22 May 2003, this article, some 35 pages in length, had been accessed 3,141 times; the web site where it appears, [sulekha.com](http://www.sulekha.com), is widely frequented by NRIs. The author describes himself as a Gandhian, and has written on Gandhian economics; but the entire piece, an elaborate defense of not only Hindutva ideology, but the debased politics of the nation-state, becomes an attack upon the Indian middle-class in India, who are said to be living in mental slavery, while Resident Bharatiya Indians [RBIs], a term that Diwan prefers to Non-resident Indians, among whom Diwan living in New York numbers himself, are described as the vanguard of an "ascendant India." Apparently, the only good Indians are those who are living overseas. Here, then, is a new Orientalism to replace the old *cliché* that the only good Indian is a dead one, though the fondness for ancient (pre-Islamic) India displayed by Hindutva ideologues suggests that the old Orientalism is by no means lifeless. In India, as we have heard, the hot weather, corruption, habits of laziness, bureaucratic inefficiency, and Oriental despotism together take their toll of those who wish to do good. Thirty or forty years of dabbling in Gandhi have, evidently, not taught Diwan anything about Gandhi; not only that, the entire article is an exercise in self-congratulation. The 2-page biographical note concludes thus: "He is a member of 20 professional associations and was invited to Prime Minister Atal Vajpayee's swearing ceremony on Oct 13, 99." Even as Diwan speaks boastfully of RBIs, does he do anything more than betray his own extreme insecurity?

<sup>12</sup>. <http://www.petitiononline.com/USINPAC/petition.html>

<sup>13</sup>. Mukesh Advani, "India's Bid for a Permanent Seat on the UN Security Council", online at: [wysiwyg://18/http://www.indolink.com/Analysis/a012003-173350.php](http://www.indolink.com/Analysis/a012003-173350.php) [accessed 19 March 2003]

<sup>14</sup>. See also the discussion on [www.redhotcurry.com/views/trash\\_talker.htm](http://www.redhotcurry.com/views/trash_talker.htm)

<sup>15</sup>. This can be heard online at: [http://www.trashtalkerdolls.com/sounds/indian\\_3.mp3](http://www.trashtalkerdolls.com/sounds/indian_3.mp3)

<sup>16</sup>. See <http://ratebeer.com/ShowBeer.asp?BeerID=5556>

<sup>17</sup>. "Trampling on Hindu Sentiments: Footwear with Ganesh Images", *India-West* (2 May 2003), p. A37.

<sup>18</sup>. Sittin' Pretty's activities were brought to the attention of the Rajya Sabha, the Upper House of the Indian Parliament, where a demand was voiced that the Indian government should pressurize the US government to take legal action against the Seattle-based firm. Vijay Singh Yadav of the Rashtriya Janata Dal is reported to have said that "there was a current craze in the U.S. about Hindu gods and firms were exploiting it by painting figures of Hindu gods on toilet covers." See Anon (2000).

<sup>19</sup>. [http://www.hindunet.org/anti\\_defamation/sittinpretty](http://www.hindunet.org/anti_defamation/sittinpretty) However "cool" the images, I suspect that Hindu Gods leave some of us hot, some of us cold: the Japanese, who have invented toilet seats that can be heated with the press of a button, would doubtless have put a different spin on the whole affair.

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