

Indian Diaspora Down Under * : A Socio-economic perspective

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Introduction

In the socio-economic parlance, it is often acknowledged that quality of a nation's people shapes its society, culture and progress while influencing its past, present and future. The nation that efficiently nurtures and prudently uses this most vital natural resource progresses more than the rest. For centuries, Australia has been a melting pot of people and culture. Like the US and Canada, Australia has a vast majority of migrant population, who arrived here in the last two hundred years. The recent census notes that one in four of Australia's people were born overseas. The population is a mix of people from nearly 200 nationalities, speaking 260 languages and linkages with more than 270 ancestries (DIBP, 2011). For Australia, migrant population have always been a significant factor to sustain its economic growth and development. The post-World War II immigration strategy- "populate or perish"- perhaps still holds true for the country. However, over the years, the immigration policies, context, legislations etc. have changed alongside the country's leadership, skills requirement, globalisation, geopolitical environment and more.

Today, Indian Community is one of the fastest growing communities in Australia and is spread wide-and-far across the country. Over the years, the Indian community has been contributing to the Australian economy, culture and society. Gradually, the contributions are being recognised. But, as a community are they that successful in Australia? What are their experiences of living down under?

Methodology

This article is based on a broader study which was carried out using both qualitative and quantitative methods. The sources of this research have been drawn from a wide range of primary and secondary material including official statistics, published data, books, journals, research articles, news reports, and seminar and conference papers. Using published official statistics drawn from different years, patterns of migration behaviour was identified. The fieldwork for this research took eight months (January- August 2013). Experiences of 25 people of Indian origin living in Australia have been recorded. 10 formal in-depth interviews (of approximately 1 hr each) were conducted and informal conversational style

* : Colloquially, Australia is known as the country down under. The term comes from the fact that Australia is located in the Southern Hemisphere, 'below' many other countries on the globe (Wikipedia, 2014).

interviews were conducted for the rest. Interviews are particularly useful for getting the story behind a participant's experiences. The interviewer can pursue in-depth information around the topic (McNamara, 1999). Random 'purposeful sampling' method was used where the cases were chosen at random from the sampling frame of a purposefully selected sample. Though not being technically 'representative' of the community, to an extent, the findings portray the experiences and situation of the community.

Australia-India -130 million year connection

Australia and India has a connection dating back to 130 million years. The story goes that once upon a time both these countries were land-locked. Recent, geological evidences prove that countries were once part of the ancient super-continent, Gondwana. Recently, Gondwana fragments were found off Perth, Western Australia (Trembath, 2011). The continent of Gondwana (meaning "forest of the Gonds" in Sanskrit that is forest of the Dravidian people in central India) was named by Austrian scientist Eduard Suess, after the Gondwana region of central northern India (Wikipedia, 2013). There is thus an ancient connection between Australia and India and a long history of migration from India to Australia. Also, recent scientific evidence found that Australian aboriginal and Indian genes got mixed more than 4,000 years ago (Sinha, 2013).

Indian diaspora in Australia- A socio-economic perspective

Prior to the unearthing of the above ground-breaking evidences, it was believed that first Indians arrived in Australia on Captain Cook's ship in 1770 (Workpermit.com, 2009). Thereafter, in the early 19th century a small number of Indians arrived in Australia as convicts transported by the British colonial government in India.

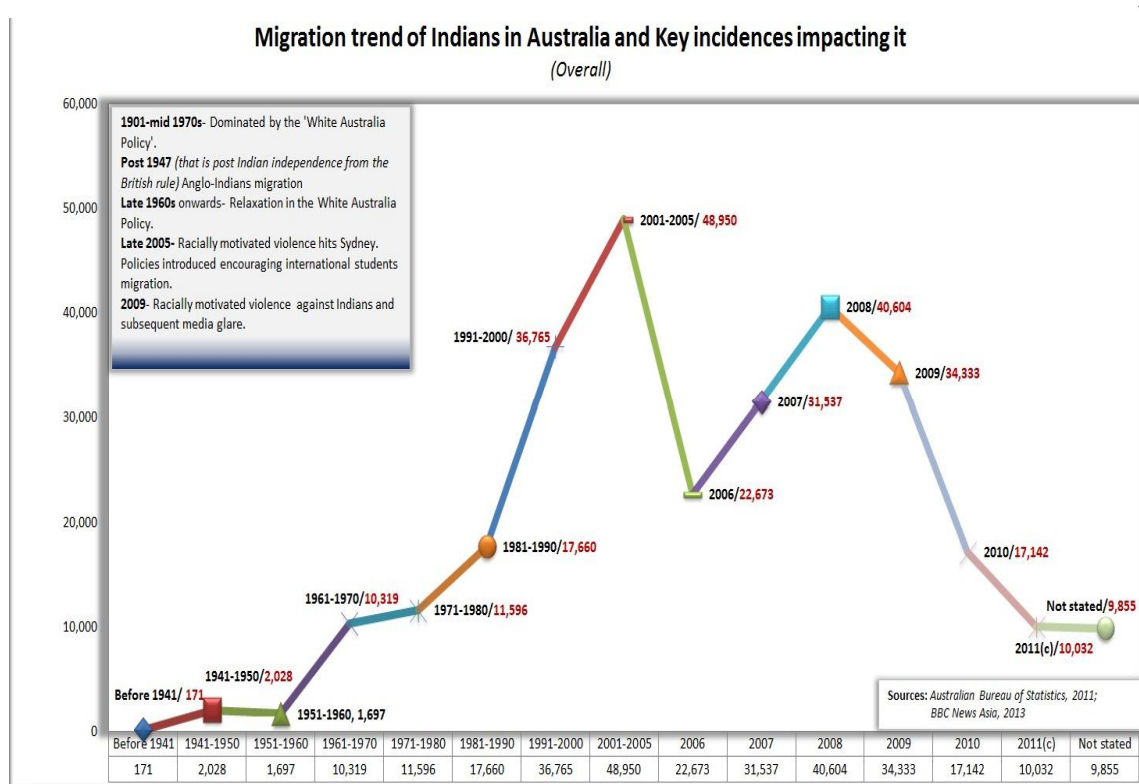
The period between 1851 and the late 1860s (popularly known as the period of Victorian gold rush) were remarkable in the history of Australian migration. In 10 years, the Australian population nearly tripled. It was during this period that goldfields were discovered in the state of Victoria. Indians were called in to work in the goldfields (Workpermit.com, 2009). Between the years 1860 and 1901 more Indians arrived. Though there were inhibitions from the general population to recruit Indian labourers on a large scale (Museum Victoria Australia, n.d), there are interesting stories galore about the Indian hawkers in Australia- who were predominantly Sikhs.

The 1881 census records 998 people who were born in India, by 1891 this had grown to over 1700. Indian migration to Australia (except Anglo-Celtic colonials or Anglo Indians) was restricted when in 1901 the Australian Government introduced the Immigration Restriction Act 1901- known as the 'White

Australia Policy'. In 1901, Indian population in Australia was at 4681, declining by 1911 to 3653 and by 1921 to 3150 (Palfreeman, 1967; Yarwood, 1967; Immigration Museum, 2009).

The restrictive 'White Australia Policy' that aimed to maintain a predominantly white population in Australia existed until the 1970s when it was fully abolished by passing The Racial Discrimination Act 1975 (Rivett, 1992). Thereafter, there was a gradual increase in the number of arrivals from India especially teachers and doctors followed by IT professionals (many of whom arrived during the Tech sector boom), accountants and cooks.

Late 2005 until 2006, there was a steep decline in the number of Indian arrivals which might be attributed to incidences relating to racially motivated violence in Sydney and Australia experiencing the worst drought in a century (BBC News Asia, 2013). However, it was during this period (late 2005), that policies encouraging international students migration were introduced by the then Government (Phillips, 2006). In the following years, the racially motivated violence against Indians and subsequent media glare impacted the immigration trend (BBC News Asia, 2013). However, many recent initiatives by the Government encouraged Indian migration to Australia, which today, is one of the fastest growing communities with over 450,000 people of Indian-origin (PTI, 2013). Exhibit 1 graphically represents the migration trend of Indians in Australia and Key incidences impacting it.



Indian population in Australia is spread wide and far in all the states of Australia- Australian Capital Territory (ACT), New South Wales (NSW), Northern Territory (NT), Queensland (QLD), South Australia (SA), Tasmania (TAS), Victoria (VIC) and Western Australia (WA). According to the 2011 census figures released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2011), majority of people of Indian origin (37.85%) lives in Victoria followed by New South Wales (32.29%), whereas 0.5% lives in the far off state of Tasmania.

In general, Indian community in Australia may be characterised as **young**- with a median age of 31 years; **qualified**- Indian born Australians were almost three times as likely as other Australians to have a Bachelor degree or above. Among Indian born Australians aged 25-64 years, 34% had a Bachelor degree, and a further 26% had a postgraduate qualification as their highest qualification. They are more likely to be qualified in the field of management and commerce followed by engineering and related technologies; and **English speaking**- A majority of them speaking English very well/well English (ABS, 2011a).

Though earning a **median weekly income** (personal) of AUD 663 (which is higher than all overseas or Australian born), yet in Australia, of people who were born in India and who were in the labour force, only 61.5% worked full-time, 27.4% worked part-time and as on August 2012, the **unemployment rate** among Indians in Australia was 6.2 per cent, which was higher than the national unemployment rate of 5.1 per cent. Throughout the entire migration process, job-seeking was identified as the most stressful and biggest challenge and was found to have a significant negative impact on the person's health and wellbeing (Deccan Herald, 2013). In many cases, **their skills remain under-utilised even though they are the top most sources in the skilled migration category**. This research also documented an interesting trend. Majority of all those who migrated here either for the **prospect of a better future** or **joining their family** did not have a smooth start. Being educated and experienced did not help them in securing quality jobs and many of them had to settle for options much lower than their capability. Throughout the entire migration process, **job-seeking was identified as the most stressful and biggest challenge** and was found to have a significant negative impact on the person's health and wellbeing. On the other hand, those who came here for **work or business** had a relatively smoother start as has been summarised in **Exhibit 2**.

Exhibit 2- Experience Australia: Reflections from the Indian Community (Summarised)

Gender	Age group	Qualification/Profession (prior to migrating to Australia)	How long have you been living in Australia? (in years)	Reason for your migration to Australia	How would you describe your first experience on your arrival in Australia?	How long did it take to secure your first job here in Australia? (in months)	Were you happy with the level of job you secured?
F	25-34	Engineer	Came for a short-term visit	For Work or business	Smooth	Already had a job	Yes
F	55-64	Civil servant	2	For Work or business	Smooth	Already had a job	Yes
M	35-44	Engineer	4	For Work or business	Smooth	Already had a job	Yes
M	35-44	Post Graduate	12	For Work or business	Smooth	Already had a job	Yes
M	45-54	Engineer	14	For Work or business	Smooth	Already had a job	Yes
M	55-64	Engineer	3	For Work or business	Smooth	Already had a job	Yes
M	25-34	Engineer	2	For Work or business (Long-term)	Smooth	Already had a job	Yes
F	35-44	Graduation (incomplete)	5	Joining Family	Smooth	1	Yes
F	35-44	Post Graduate	7	Joining Family	Not smooth	Still unemployed	NA
F	35-44	Post Graduate	4	Joining Family	Not smooth	5	No
F	25-34	Engineer	6	Joining Family	Not smooth	6	Yes
M	45-54	Engineer	13	Joining Family	Not smooth	9	No
F	35-44	Post Graduate	11	Joining Family	Not smooth	24	Yes
F	45-54	Chartered Accountant	17	Joining Family	Smooth	2	Yes
M	55-64	Doctorate	17	Prospect of a better future	Smooth	2	Yes
M	45-54	Medical Professional	23	Prospect of a better future	Smooth	Immediately	Yes
M	> 65	Post Graduate	30	Prospect of a better future	Not smooth	6	No
M	45-54	Engineer	9	Prospect of a better future	Smooth	2	Yes
M	55-64	Civil servant	12	Prospect of a better future	Smooth		Yes
M	55-64	Engineer	30	Prospect of a better future	Not smooth	5	No
M	35-44	Engineer	11	Prospect of a better future	Not smooth	6	No
M	35-44	Chartered Accountant	4	Prospect of a better future	Not smooth	4	No
F	25-34	Engineer	4	Prospect of a better future	Not smooth	4	No
F	45-54	Post Graduate	15	Prospect of a better future	Not smooth	7	No
M	55-64	Engineer	18	Prospect of a better future	Not smooth	6	No

The economics of Australia-India links

Since the time India opened its trade office in Australia in 1941 and appointed its first High Commissioner to Australia in 1945, it has come a long way. India is now the fourth-largest destination for Australian exports of goods and services. There are around 150 Australian companies that have established its presence in India, similar to the total number of Indian companies in Australia (DFAT, 2012). In tourism sector, during the twelve month period ending 31 December, 2010, a total of 138,700 Indians visited Australia, an increase of 11 per cent compared to the same period the previous year (many of whom visited their local relatives). Similarly, in the education sector, Indian international student numbers have recovered making India the second-largest source of international students in Australia.

Highlighting the changing pattern in Indian migration in Australia and the flow of money between the two nations, a recent study conducted by RMIT professor reveals that unlike previous situations when money flowed from Australia to India in family and community remittances, there is **now a two-way flow of**

money. According to the data released by, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), Australia, AUD 6.88 billion went from Australia to India in 2010-2011 – AUD 4.8 billion in investment and AUD 2.08 billion in merchandise trade. Whereas, three times more money equal to AUD 20.4 billion came from India to Australia. This takes into account the AUD 2.9 billion in education which was remitted by upper middle class families for helping their children secure a better future; AUD 1.6 billion documented as foreign direct investment by Austrade; and AUD 15.74 billion in merchandise trade (Singh, 2012).

Where to from now?

Our research highlighted the fact that though Indian diaspora down under has been growing at a rapid pace, yet unlike Indian community in other developed nations like the US or UK, who are known for their significant contributions and excellence- be it in the fields of science, technology, politics, business, academics and more, the community in Australia as a whole has to further evolve to raise its profile. The research further raised a question whether **the overall perceived image of India** (often characterised by **3Cs- Chaos, Corruption and Cronyism**) has any role to play for such a state.

Perhaps yes. In the global context, with the economies of developed countries (like the US and Western Europe) picking up investors are gradually pulling back from investing in India. Corruption and cronyism has been identified as tarnishing the brand image of the country (Banerjee, 2013). Such brand image of the country and extension of such behaviour is even affecting the local Indian community present here in Australia. For instance, a majority of our respondents revealed their unhappiness on image tarnishing issues like fake certificate scandals and other immigration frauds. They also expressed their resentments on impolite behaviour exhibited by quite a few Australian-Indians that include breaking queues, speaking loudly in public transport and other behaviour perceived to be rude in western cultures.

Interestingly, respondents were quite vocal in advocating the need to raise the profile of the community as can be seen from the following comments-

- *“I believe how a society look upon you depends on how you portray yourself” ...;*
- *“Each one of us is an ambassador of the country and is reflection of India”...;*
- *“As a community, we need to encourage an integrated Indian identity within the broader Australian identity”...;*
- *“Missing one strong and unified Indian voice”...;*

- “Community should be supporting each other but there are still a lot of division among us. It is perhaps in our DNA”...;
- “We need more Australian-Indians to get involved and become change makers”...;
- “We are good at organising cultural events but we have to go beyond that and excel in our respective professional sphere as well”...;(Mukherjee Saha, 2013)

Broadly, the community appreciates the quality of life, egalitarianism, good healthcare and education system, organised systems/procedures and beauty of the natural environment in Australia. Over the years, the Indian community has been contributing for the sustainable development of the Australian economy, culture and society. It has also been highlighted through this research that there is no dearth of talent among the Indian community living in Australia. However, proper utilisation of this pool of talent is yet to be harnessed. Their skills remain under-utilised even though they are the top most sources in the skilled migration category. Being educated and experienced did not help them in securing quality jobs and many of them had to settle for options much lower than their capability. There is a therefore a need to re-look at the immigration laws and policies to best utilise this talent pool. To an extent, the 3Cs did have an impact on the overall perception of the community. After all, ‘Experience’ is a two-way affair and it requires hard work- warm hearts

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