

INDO-AMERICAN RELATIONS IN A NEW LIGHT

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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 and the United States emerged as one of the two global superpowers.

Indians generally misperceive the history of Indian-American contacts. Many Indians have heard about the Boston Tea Party. Some believe that goods imported from India into the American colonies were a major cause of the American Revolution. This is not so. Tea was dumped into the Boston Harbor by American freedom fighters to protest the British policies of mercantilism. The fact that tea originated from India was by itself of little importance.

Lord Cornwallis, Governor General of India from 1786 to 1793, provides another minor footnote to history. Before being sent to India, Cornwallis fought the American revolutionaries. He was defeated at Yorktown in 1781. This sealed the fate of the British imperial rule in the American colonies. Cornwallis was re-assigned to India. The British colonial yoke was imposed on the people of India just as it was lifted off the backs of the Americans. Along with Robert Clive and Warren Hastings, Cornwallis is the architect of the British Empire in India,

I will describe first the downward drift that occurred in Indo-American relations during the Cold War. Indo-American relations in the 21st century are likely to improve. Three reasons are specified for this optimism: (1) the improved economic relations between the two countries, (2) the growing political clout of the Non-Resident Indians settled in America, and (3) the growth of Eastern spiritual practices in America, such as yoga, meditation, and kirtans.

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 Greece and Turkey against Soviet threat. This policy became known as the Truman Doctrine.

The Marshall Plan, named after the then Secretary of State George C. Marshall, was also launched in 1947. The Plan provided some \$12 billion to European countries for reconstruction and development. The program was immensely successful in uplifting the war-torn economies. Western Europe emerged as a leading economic power.

So did the military rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union reach a new high. The Soviet government engineered the overthrow of a democratic government in Czechoslovakia in February 1948. Further, the Soviet Union imposed the infamous Berlin Blockade in July 1948. The Soviet Union sought to drive Western Powers out of Eastern Europe and the city of Berlin. The Blockade failed as the Western powers supplied the city by air.

The Cold War reached a new high during the 1962 Cuban Missiles Crisis. Fortunately a nuclear war was averted.

The American policy to check Soviet expansionist moves is known as “the Containment Policy.” George F. Kennan, a young State Department employee provided a rationale in 1947. In *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.

INDO-AMERICAN RELATIONS DURING THE COLD WAR

The United States supported the Indian struggle for independence during and prior to WWII. This was natural as America herself had been a colony of the British. Mahatma Gandhi was immensely popular in the US. The Secretary of State George C Marshall described Mahatma Gandhi as “the spokesman of the moral conscience of mankind.” In an opinion survey, Mahatma Gandhi and Charlie Chaplain were polled as being the most admired persons by the American populace. Both Gandhi and Charlie Chaplain stood for the dignity of the little man.

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

Pandit Nehru (prime minister 1947-64) was an immensely popular leader at the world stage. He was good-looking, charming and bore an aristocratic demeanor. He had achieved status as a scholar and author. He wrote the acclaimed *Discovery of India* (1946), and *Glimpses of World History* (1934), among other writings. Nehru was admired for his commitment to democracy and the rule of law. He helped fashion a democratic constitution for India. Nehru also benefitted by inheriting Mahatma Gandhi's mantle. The revered Mahatma anointed Nehru as India's first prime minister.

Nehru emerged as the leader of the non-alignment movement in early decades of the Cold War. Along with Nasser of Egypt, Tito of Yugoslavia and Sukarno of Indonesia, Pandit Nehru played a leading role. The non-alignment movement sought to distance itself from both the US and the Soviet Union. It sought to provide an independent voice on international subject matter.

The American leadership wanted Nehru as a partner in its competition against the Soviet Union. I do believe that the United States would have done almost anything to have Nehru on its side, given Nehru's world stature. Democratic India was perceived then as a counterweight to Communist China. The natural alliance between the United States and India did not come to fruition, however. Mistakes were made on both sides.

Nehru had spent his formative years in Britain as a student in the early part of the 20th Century. The British then ruled the waves and were the strongest global power at that period. The British viewed Americans as being rude, crude, and boorish. Nehru assessed American culture through the eyes of the British. As an impressionable student at Eton, Nehru picked up these British attitudes about the United States and its people.

Socialist ideology was popular at British elite universities before the War. As a student at the London School of Economics, Nehru imbibed these socialistic ideas about the evils of capitalism. Before economic reforms were enacted in England, the evils of capitalism were evident: concentration of wealth, monopolies, boom and bust cycles, an underprivileged lower class, and the influence of big capital on public policy. Nehru's socialist views were further strengthened by his friendship with V. K. Krishna Menon, a fellow student in London and later India's representative at the United Nations. Krishna Menon had the reputation of living a Spartan life; his food consisting often of tea and biscuits. He was sometimes called "a crypto communist", i.e. a covert communist. He was a passionate and a fiery speaker. America was frequently the recipient of Menon's wrath at the United Nations. Menon influenced Nehru to distance India 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 the middle position; one cannot sit on the fence. The very powerful Secretary of State John Foster Dulles thundered: "They who are not with us are against us." Dulles would not accept India's neutrality and its policy of non-alignment as being morally defensible.

To checkmate expanding Soviet power, the United States established several military alliances. North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was established in 1949. The Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) and the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) were established a few years later. The United States wanted very much for India to be a member of one of these military alliances. Nehru would have none of that. The United States then turned to Pakistan. Pakistan became a member both of SEATO and CENTO. Pakistan was not sincere in its anti-Communist zeal. Russia and China were not its enemies. Pakistan joined the military alliances for opportunistic reasons. As a member, it received large-scale American military and economic aid. The weapons received could then be used against India.

Spurned by the American military aid to Pakistan, India gravitated gradually towards the Soviet Union and China. India championed China's admission to the UN. The United States opposed it. India supported the Arab position against Israel. The U. S. took the opposite stand. India's support for the Arab cause was rooted in its domestic politics. Pro-Arab, 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 in their time, history shows that these policies did not serve India well.

Indo-American relations reached a new low during the 1971 Pakistan-Bangladesh war. The Pakistani military ruled Bangladesh with a heavy hand. The genocidal war killed nearly a million Bangladeshis, both Muslim and Hindu. Many of those eliminated were students, teachers and the scholars. The War led to a mass migration of people into India. Finally, India intervened militarily on the side of Bangladesh's struggle for freedom. America "tilted" to the side of Pakistan. This was a low point in Indo-American relations.

During the Reagan presidency (1980-88), relations began to improve slowly but surely. Indira Gandhi was warmly received at the Reagan White House. The upward movement in relations continued during both the first Bush presidency (1988-92) and the early years of the Clinton presidency (1992-2000). India's 1998 testing of nuclear weapons set back the burgeoning Indo-American relations.

America's strong opposition to India acquiring a minimum nuclear deterrence is indefensible. It ignores India's legitimate security needs against rival China and unstable Pakistan.

India seeks a permanent seat at the United Nations Security Council. The United States is lukewarm to India's demand. Interestingly, the U.S. supports a permanent seat for Germany (80 million) and for Japan (125 million) but not for India (1 billion). This does not sit well with India.

The 21st century opened with an upswing in relations. President Clinton's visited India in March of 2000, the first for a President in 22 years. Clinton was extremely well-received by the Indian public. He was pictured dancing with admiring Indian women in the State of Rajasthan. Clinton

met a variety of citizen groups, with much positive outcome. Prime Minister Vajpayee paid a return visit to the US in September. He addressed a joint session of the Congress—a high honor.

The 9/11/2001 terrorist attack on the Twin Towers helped bring India and the U.S. closer together. India is an important ally in fighting terrorism. India supported the 2001 American military action in Afghanistan, but it criticized the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Under the Bush Administration, the Congress approved the civilian nuclear deal with India, a major step forward. India is wary of the large economic and military aid package being given to Pakistan by the American administration. Part of the economic inflow will be used by Pakistan for activities against India rather than to fight Muslim extremists.

Progress in Indo-American relations is a slow going matter. A closer relation would benefit both countries. India hopes to attract greater foreign financial investment. It also seeks to establish itself as a key regional and international player. It needs American help in achieving these goals. The United States needs India's huge market for selling American goods, to limit nuclear proliferation, to fight terrorism and to checkmate growing Chinese influence.

INDO-AMERICAN RELATIONS IN A NEW LIGHT

I do believe that Indo-American relations will enter a new positive phase in the 21st century. The Cold War that poisoned Indo-American relations is history. Three relevant factors are:

1. Burgeoning economic relations between the two countries
2. Growing size of the Indian population in the United States
3. Growing Eastern spiritual practices in America

ECONOMIC RELATIONS

India's economic system is being "liberalized." Socialist policies that guided Indian development for several decades after Independence are under a cloud. Private enterprises are now encouraged. State owned economic enterprises are being dismantled. Foreign financial investment, once looked at with suspicion, is now welcome. The economic reforms began with Prime Minister P.N. Rao (1991-96). They picked up speed under the BJP Government of A. B. Vajpayee (1998-2003), and PM Narendra Modi (2014--). American financial investments in India have increased substantially as a result of these reforms. The economic relations will grow. Economic ties should override political differences in due time.

This aspect of Indo-American relations is well covered in the press, and is not detailed here.

PEOPLE OF INDIAN ORIGIN IN THE UNITED STATES

Some 800,000 Indians lived in the US in 1990. This number doubled to 1.7 million in the Census of 2000. The number reached 2.8 million in 2010, or 1 pct of the US population. Jews number only 5 million. Their political influence is legendary.

Indian residents are well placed in the professions and in business. Their educational and income levels are higher than of other ethnic groups in the U.S., including whites. Indian software professionals have acquired a global reputation. An American consular officer once told me that of all the H-1 working visas that are issued by the American Consulates around the globe, 80 percent are issued to Indians.

The migration of people from India into the United States is of recent vintage. It began in 1965 when American immigration law was changed. The 1965 law abolished the so-called Quota System. The Quota system allowed large immigration from Western Europe but a miniscule number from Asian countries. For example, India had a quota of 100 persons per year. The 1965 law put all countries on an equal footing. The immigration history is briefly described in my article on “Indian Americans” at www.uwf.edu/lgoel.

Indians have begun to organize themselves socially, religiously and politically. Money is raised to lobby US government and to support pro-India candidates during elections. This effort has begun to bear some fruit. The newly created India Caucus at the Capitol Hill boasts a membership of over 100. Members are drawn from both chambers of the US Congress. It is said to be the largest country-related Congressional Caucus, drawing members from both political parties. Congressmen Frank Pallone and Gary Ackerman were noted India supporters.

While the India lobby has born some fruit, it is no match to the influence wielded by Jewish, Irish and Islamic lobbies. The Jewish lobby in particular is well known for its effectiveness in the congressional corridors.

GROWING EASTERN SPIRITUAL PRACTICES IN AMERICA

Spiritual practices derived from Hinduism and Buddhism are finding a niche in America. From 10 to 20 percent of Americans identify themselves as “spiritual but not religious.” See Robert Fuller’s book: *Spiritual but not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America*, Oxford University Press 2001. Many Americans practice yoga and meditation. Group chanting of Sanskrit mantras or Kirtans attracts many participants. Krishna Dass, Jai Uttal and Gaura Vani draw crowds.

American interest in Indian spirituality can be traced back to the Transcendentalist Movement of the middle of the 19th century. Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau were the leaders of the Movement. Others included Margaret Fuller, Palmer Peabody, James Freeman Clark, and Charles and Myrtle Fillmore. Madam Helena Blavatsky and Annie Besant founded the Theosophical Society which attracted followers in the West. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote,

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 descriptions of God and 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 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. Contemplative solitude is necessary. Henry David Thoreau lived in a small 10 x 15 foot 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)¹. 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.

A number of Hindu swamis and yogis who traveled to the US beginning with 1890s advanced the cause of Hinduism in the United States. Swami Vivekananda's lecture at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 gained immense popularity. He established Ramakrishna Centers in several large American cities and attracted followers. Parmahansa Yogananda followed and established the Self Realization Fellowship in 1920. Yogananda's popular *Autobiography of a Yogi* has sold in millions. More recent religious entrants in America include the following: Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, Swami Muktananda, Bhaktivedanta Prabhupada, Swami Rama, Vishnu Devananda, Sacchidananda, Chinmayananda, Dayananda, and Kripalvananda. Deepak Chopra is a popular new age writer and speaker. A dozen centers teach Integral Yoga based on the writings and teachings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother of Pondicherry.

¹ Henry David Thoreau is better known in India. Thoreau's small book *Civil Disobedience* (1849) influenced Mahatma Gandhi as he developed his philosophy of *Satyagraha* to oppose the British colonial rule.

NEW THOUGHT CHURCHES IN AMERICA

The New Thought spiritual movement is a growing movement in the United States. A partial listing of New Thought or New Age churches includes: 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.

I attend services of the Unity Church of Christianity in Pensacola, Florida. It was founded by Charles and Myrtle Fillmore in 1889. Unity teaches the following precepts. Several of these reflect Hindu and Buddhist views rather than Christian dogma.

1. God is absolute good, everywhere present. The Hindu Upanishad says: “*Isha vasyam idam sarvam*.”-- In the heart of everything, of whatever there is in the universe, dwells the Lord.”
2. Every human being has a spark of divinity within, the Christ Spirit within. Our essence is of God, and therefore human beings are inherently good. Lord Krishna says in the Bhagavad Gita, “I reside in the heart of all beings. I am in them and they are in Me.”
3. As human beings we create our experiences by the activity of our thoughts. Everything that shows up in our lives has its beginning in thought.
4. Prayer and meditation is the best way we can heighten our connection with God.
5. Belief in reincarnation among Church members is common.
6. Within Unity, Jesus is regarded by many members as a teacher, a way-shower, not “the only begotten son of God.”
7. Unity Church is non-sectarian. One does not give up one’s faith to join the Church.

Charles and Myrtle Fillmore, the founders of the Unity Church, adopted a vegetarian diet. Vegetarianism is a growing movement in America. The close association between Hindu principles and the New Thought teachings is clearly evident.

Pensacola, Florida, is a medium sized southern city with a metropolitan population of about 400,000. It is not a huge metropolis like New York, Chicago or Atlanta. The following religious groups function in and around Pensacola (2008).

- Integral Knowledge Study Center, dedicated to the teachings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother.
- Self Realization Fellowship, relating to Parmahansa Yoganand.
- The Sai Baba Group.
- Theosophical Society.
- The Siddha Yoga Meditation Center.
- Some half-a-dozen Hatha Yoga studios.
- The OM Center.
- The Center for Non-Dualism based on Patanjali’s yoga.

In addition there are ½ dozen Buddhist groups that function in and around Pensacola. The list provided here is based purely on personal knowledge. I taught a beginning class in Sanskrit and Hindi at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Pensacola a few years ago. Some 30 adults ranging in age from 20 to 70 attended the class for several weeks.

Creedal religions based on dogma are on the decline. More and more people are becoming seekers rather than believers. America leads the way, as in many other things. Spirituality that first took root in India, and spread to Japan and China is finding a new home in America.

Lisa Miller (*Newsweek*, 31 August, 2009) reported that “we are slowly becoming more like Hindus and less like traditional Christians in the ways we think about God, our selves, each other, and eternity.” She cites the following US poll data: 67 percent believe that many religions, not only Christianity, can lead to eternal life; 30 percent of American call themselves “spiritual, not religious;” 24 percent say they believe in reincarnation; and more than a third choose cremation rather than burial. <http://www.newsweek.com/id/212155> New York City has 40 Tibetan Buddhist centers, up from 2 in 1968.

Eckhart Tolle is the author of two popular books: *A New Earth: Awakening to your Life's Purpose*, 2005, *A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life's Purpose*, 2008. Eckhart Tolle appeared on the Oprah show for several weeks in early 2008. Some 20 million people watched these webcasts. Tolle's teachings are derived from Zen Buddhism and Hindu Vedanta: we are not the body, or the mind or the emotions; we are the ever present awareness within, the ever-present Consciousness. To the extent we live in the ever-present Consciousness, to that extent we are free. As the Consciousness is one, we all are united, members of a single family. Differences are unreal.

The United States is a Global Nation. People from around the world have come to live here. The strength of America lies in the fact that its blood lines are renewed every generation. Today Asian Americans including people from India enrich its blood pool. America is open to diverse philosophical and religious ideas. The fact that Indian spiritual ideas have found a niche in America is a testimony to the openness and confidence 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 enrich both nations.

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