

INDO-AMERICAN RELATIONS IN A NEW LIGHT

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Revised

This essay was written in 1999, and is revised to some extent. The points made continue to be relevant in the present century. This essay provides a short overview of the Indo-American relations since Nehru's time.

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 against 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,

This essay describes the downward drift that occurred in Indo-American relations during the Cold War; mistakes were made on both the Indian and American sides. We describe briefly the role of Nehru as the leader of the Non-alignment movement; and then a brief account of the improving situation in the 21st century. Among the several reasons for improvement, three are specified in this essay: (1) the improved economic relations, (2) the growing political clout of the Non-Resident Indians settled in America, and (3) the rising popularity of yoga and meditation.

DETERIORATION DURING 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 the Soviet expansionist 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 power and as America's ally against the Soviet bloc.

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 from 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.

U.S. APPROACH TO INDIA

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 before the War, Mahatma Gandhi and Charlie Chaplain were polled as being the most admired persons by the American populace. Gandhi and Chaplain both 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. Also, these lie in the narrow view of the world held by the then US 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 was an acclaimed scholar and author of: *Discovery of India* (1946), and *Glimpses of World History* (1934), among other writings. Nehru was admired for his commitment to democracy and to 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, over Vallabh Bhai Patel.

The Non-Alignment Movement. 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 the leading role. The non-alignment movement sought to distance itself from both the US and the Soviet Union. It provided an independent voice on conflictual world events, such as the Suez Crisis of 1956-57.

The American leadership, on the other hand, wanted Nehru to join as a partner in its opposition to the Soviet Union. Democratic India was then perceived as a counterweight to Communism. Given Nehru's world stature, the United States would have done almost anything, I do believe, to have Nehru on its side. Unfortunately, this did not come to fruition. Mistakes were made on both sides.

Nehru had spent his formative years in Britain as a student in early 1900s. The British were the strongest global power then. The British viewed Americans as being "rude, crude, and lewd." Nehru assessed American culture through the eyes of the British.

Socialist ideas were also then gaining popularity in Britain, as at the London School of Economics. Nehru imbibed these left-leaning philosophies. Nehru's socialist views were further strengthened by his friendship with V. K. Krishna Menon, a fellow student in London. Krishna Menon had the reputation of living a Spartan life; his food consisting often only of tea and biscuits. His critics called him "a crypto communist", i.e. a covert communist. Menon was a passionate and a fiery speaker at the United Nations. America was frequently the recipient of his wrath. 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 as being morally defensible.

To checkmate expanding Soviet power, the United States established several military alliances: North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1949; Southeast Asian Treaty Organization

(SEATO) and the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) a few years later. The United States wanted very much for rising India to join one of these military pacts. 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. Pakistan received large US 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, while 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 Muslims, 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 in sections of India, history shows that these policies were ill-conceived and have hurt India. China took advantage of Nehru's naivete, and took control of Tibet.

The Bangladesh War. Indo-American relations reached a new low during the 1971 Pakistan-Bangladesh war. The Pakistani military dealt with Bangladeshi war of independence with a very heavy hand. The occupying Pakistani force killed nearly three million Bangladeshis, both Hindu and Muslim. Teachers, scholars and students were especially targeted for liquidation. This led to a mass migration of people into India, over 10 million. India finally intervened militarily on the side of Bangladesh. But America "tilted" to the side of Pakistan. This was a low point in Indo-American relations.

The Reagan Years. During the Reagan presidency (1980-88), relations improved gradually. Indira Gandhi was received warmly at the Reagan White House. The upward movement in relations continued during both the elder 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.

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 (over a billion).

Upswing in the New Century

The new 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 further brought 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.

During America's war against the Taliban in Afghanistan, Pakistan received huge amounts of military and economic aid from the US. India is critical and wary of this aid-package. Pakistan's military build-up is designed more to fight India than to fight Muslim extremists in Afghanistan.

Given this checkered history, progress in Indo-American relations is a slow process. A closer relation would benefit both countries. But countries do not quickly change their course.

INDO-AMERICAN RELATIONS IN A NEW LIGHT

Indo-American relations will likely improve significantly in the 21st century. The Cold War that poisoned Indo-American relations is history. Three positive factors are briefly described here:

1. Burgeoning economic relations between India and the US
2. Growing size of the Indian population in the United States
3. The growing influence of Indian spiritual practices in the US

ECONOMIC RELATIONS

India's economic system is being "liberalized" in the new century. Socialist policies that ruled the roost for most of India's independent history are increasingly in disfavor. State owned economic enterprises are gradually 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), and picked up speed under A. B. Vajpayee (1998-2003), and then under PM Narendra Modi (2014 onward).

The year 2021 may be a significant one in this respect. India is a major manufacturer of pharmaceuticals. Covid-19 has been the scourge of mankind in the year 2020, with millions who have succumbed to the virus. The United States leads the world in the number of infections and the number who have died from the virus (2020 data). Here, India can play a major role. India's cost of production of drugs is much lower than it is in the West. It can therefore supply the vaccines to the world, including to the West, at a much lower price. Further, because of anger at China, where the Coronavirus originated, a number of the American and European manufacturing units may relocate to India. So it has been reported. If this does occur, economic interdependence between India and the US will grow. Economic ties will in time override political differences.

INDIANS IN THE UNITED STATES

Some 800,000 Indians lived in the US in 1990. This number doubled to 1.7 million in 2000, and to 3.2 million in 2018. This number is likely 4.1 million or more in 2021 (Pew survey estimate). This is not a mean number. American Jews number approximately 5 million. Their political influence is legendary.

Indians are well placed in the professions and in business. 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, much smaller from Eastern and Southern Europe, but a miniscule number from Asia. For example, India and China each had a quota of 100 persons per year, whereas tiny Ireland had a huge quota of 28,567. For information on quotas, see: <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5078> .

Indian and Asian inflow begins with 1965. The 1965 immigration reform law put all countries on an equal footing, irrespective to race and color. The history of American immigration policy is briefly described in my article titled “Asian Americans” at the present site, and also 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 India Caucus at the Capitol Hill boasted a membership of over 120 in the Congress. Members were drawn from both the House and the Senate. In the past years, Congressmen Frank Pallone and Gary Ackerman were noted India supporters. It was the first country-specific caucus and was instrumental in the smooth passage of the Indo-US Civil Nuclear Deal. Tulsi Gabbard was a Hindu congresswoman from the State of Hawaii. Kamala Devi Harris is the 2020 elected vice-President of the United States.

While the India lobby has born some fruit, it is no match to the power of Jewish, Irish and Muslim lobbies. The Jewish lobby in particular is well known for its effectiveness. Muslim groups also exercise great political influence. Indians collectively are a poor match, sadly. Indians are privately rich but politically poor.

GROWING EASTERN SPIRITUAL PRACTICES IN AMERICA

Spiritual practices derived from Hinduism and Buddhism are finding a niche in American cultural landscape. From 25-30 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. For recent data, see Pew surveys on religious

denominations in the US. Many Americans practice yoga and meditation. *Kirtans* or the chanting of Sanskrit mantras in a group setting has caught on. Krishna Dass, Jai Uttal and Gaura Vani draw large crowds. Hare Krishnas have over 50 temples in the US, and over 500 worldwide.

THE NEW THOUGHT MOVEMENT

The New Thought spiritual movement is a growing movement in the United States. New Thought churches come under a variety of names: Unity, Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, Science of Mind, Divine Science, Temple of the Universe, Theosophy, Self Realization, and the Centers for Spiritual Awareness. For several years, I attended services of the Unity Church in Pensacola, Florida, and also I served on its Board of Directors. Unity, headquartered in the state of Missouri, was founded by Charles and Myrtle Fillmore in 1889.

Note Unity's following principles reflecting dharmic principles rather than Christian theology.

1. God is absolute good, everywhere present.
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.
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 Unity Church members is common.
6. Within Unity, Jesus is generally regarded 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.

The Hindu Upanishad says: "*Isha vasyam idam sarvam*.-- In the heart of everything, of whatever there is in the universe, dwells the Lord." Unity statements recited at services each Sunday reflects this doctrine.

Charles and Myrtle Fillmore, the founders of the Unity Church, adopted a vegetarian diet. Vegetarianism is a growing movement in America. There was an active vegetarian society in Pensacola.

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

Lisa Miller (*Newsweek*, 31 August, 2009, <http://www.newsweek.com/id/212155>) created quite a stir: "US Views on God and Life are Turning Hindu." She wrote in *Newsweek* 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." Lisa cited the following US poll data.

67 percent of Americans 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;
more than a third choose cremation rather than burial.

Things have only changed since Lisa Miller wrote in 2009. Presently in 2021, 40 pct choose cremation over burial. New York City has 40 Tibetan Buddhist centers, up from 2 in 1968. Medium-size Pensacola in Florida has two Buddhist shrines, and several yoga and meditation centers.

Parting Thought. The United States is a Global Nation. People from every corner of the world have come to live here. The strength of America lies in the fact that its blood lines are renewed every generation. Today Indian Americans enrich the blood pool. For the reasons briefly described here, Indo-American relations will take an upward turn in the 21st century. It is only fitting that they do so. It will benefit both nations.