

INDIA US INTERACTIONS BEFORE 1947Dr. Namita Kumari*
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In the first half of 21st century, the relationship between India and USA are flourishing and both are becoming 'natural partners' and 'strategic allies'. At this juncture, this article proposes to look back in time. What was the nature and content of interaction between these two countries before India's independence? The strength and influence of Indian diaspora is well known in contemporary US-India relations. However the roots of Indian immigration goes back in time for almost two centuries. During colonial period, image about India was mainly created by the writings and works of British writers. These were prejudiced and biased opinions. However, the journey of great spiritual leaders, like Swami Vivekananda and Swami Yogananda and writings and works of Raja Rammohan Roy, Tagore, Gandhi and others had helped in creating a positive image about India and Indians. Later, many American politicians and statesman had very positive views about India's freedom struggle. This article is an attempt to provide an overview of Indo-US interactions during colonial period.

Keywords : India, USA, colonial period, Swami Vivekananda.

Introduction

The interest of American people in South Asia goes back to colonial period. The awareness and knowledge about South Asia amongst Americans, started with the journey of Swami Vivekananda to USA. However this knowledge about India was restricted to certain quarters and also limited. For larger American population, the limited knowledge about India was mainly through the prism of British writers. The writings and works of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, swami Vivekananda, Paramhansa Yogananda, Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi were important in creating some positive perception of India, Indian people and its culture. With its own colonial experience, the United States was against colonialism. But it could not push very hard its friend and ally Britain in case of Indian colonialism. Although around Second World War, the US administration did try to impress upon British that an Independent India will be an asset in the fight against Fascism and Nazism.

Indian Migration To Us Before 1947

When the first Indian arrived in USA? There are evidences which indicate that one individual of Indian origin was a slave in USA, long back in 1776. There is also some literature which indicates that in 1790, an unnamed 'Man from Madras' was recorded in the streets of Massachusetts. There are occasional references about individual Indians at different places in the United States, however this movement can only be seen as very limited and scattered. Indian immigration began to be recorded at the turn of the century. They arrived on trans-Pacific ships, like most other Asian immigrants at the time, mainly via Hong Kong because there was no passenger service between India and the West Coast. By the beginning of the 20th century, the Indian immigrants coming to United States, were mainly engaged in the works like: agriculture, lumber, and railroad industries. By 1910, there were roughly 5000 Indians in the United States. And there was a growing feeling of dislike against

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them as they were called by different derogatory names. Indians and "other non-European immigrants" were the targets of a series of laws of 1917, 1921, and 1924, and these laws and other exclusions ultimately banned Indian immigration altogether. Although the Luce-Celler Act of 1946 set a quota of 100 Indian immigrants per year, the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 completely abolished the national quota and paved the way for non-European immigrants'. Among the early immigrants, a large number were Sikhs, but there were some Hindus too.

Spiritual Messengers From India

Apart from the immigrants, who went to America in search of wealth or employment, there are a few notable personalities, who visited United States and stayed there for some years. These spiritual leaders have left an indelible impression on Americans. Their sojourn in the United States have also helped to enhance the image of India. The foremost among such personalities were Swami Vivekananda. He went to the United States as a delegate to the World's Parliament of Religions. Swami Vivekananda opened his speech at the Parliament of Religions with the famous salutation, "Sisters and Brothers of America!" Swami Vivekananda said that I bring greetings to the youngest of nations of world from the most ancient order of Sannyasins and monks in the world. Swami ji elaborated that the Hindu religion has taught the world both universal acceptance and tolerance.

With his speech he received wide acclamation and praise. The New York Herald wrote: 'Vivekananda is undoubtedly the greatest figure in the Parliament of Religions. After hearing him we feel how foolish it is to send missionaries to this learned nation'. Recalling this event, Romain Rolland acknowledged that the thought of this warrior prophet of India left a deep mark upon the United States.

Vivekananda continued to draw attention after the Parliament, giving talks on Hindu philosophy and popularising the practise of yoga. In New York, he started the Vedanta Society, which later expanded to Boston and San Francisco.

Paramhansa Yogananda is another towering figure from Indian monk tradition, who left a deep imprint on

America in the early 20th century. Yogananda arrived in America in 1920. In the International Congress of Religions (held in Boston) he made his first speech on "The Science of Religion.". Later he travelled across America and also founded the Self-Realization Fellowship (SRF). The purpose of the SRF was to spread the message of ancient Indian tradition and system of yoga and meditation. Yogananda travelled and taught extensively between 1924 and 1935, speaking to sold-out audiences in several of America's largest auditoriums, including Carnegie Hall in New York and the Los Angeles Philharmonic Auditorium. The Los Angeles Times reported that the hall with 3000 seats was filled to its utmost capacity".

During his thirty years in the West, he taught the soul-awakening practises of Kriya Yoga to committed pupils, initiating over 100,000 men and women. He made his yoga teachings more accessible to Westerners. American press praised him by various names, like "Hindu genius," "seer," and "psychologist" . Even a famous newspaper The Los Angeles Times, called Yogananda as the first superstar guru of the 20th century. Yogananda's book 'The Autobiography of a Yogi' was one of the famous books on spirituality and philosophy. The popularity of the book also helped in creating a positive and mystique image about Hinduism and Yogananda. The followers of Yogananda were mainly white Americans. And this educated elite appreciated rational thinking, therefore Yogananda approached Kriya Yoga from a scientific point of view, and convinced his community that the science of Kriya Yoga was the answer to liberate the spiritual self from physical and mental interference..

It is a fact that the initial knowledge and awareness about India in America was scant and based on prejudices and bias. However, Swami Vivekananda's visit played an important role in shaking the existing viewpoint about India in USA. Swami Ji's efforts in America were important in terms of creating a positive perception about India, its people and its religion. Later the efforts of Paramhansa Yogananda for a longer period of time in USA was very important in building the bridges between Indian and American culture through his innovative