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**From the Selected Works of Aubrey W. Bonnett**

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## Coolie Odyssey

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## COOLIE ODYSSEY

Writing in 1988, in a sequel to **Slave Song** which chronicled the travails –linguistic and otherwise – of African slaves in Guyana, noted Guyanese scholar, David Dabydeen, now domiciled and trained in England, authored a book entitled, **Coolie Odyssey**. This book is a literary excursion into the odyssey of Indo- Guyanese and their indentured immersion into Caribbean culture, amidst the evolving slave and Creole culture. It is a remarkable piece of literary work- indeed they both are.

But here in the USA amidst the melting pot, salad bowl, cultural pluralism and other paradigms of immigration, there has emerged a Coolie Odyssey and that is the migration of Indian immigrants, (often called Asian – Indians or South Asian), to America. A far cry from the period of blatant white supremacy and its impact on U.S immigration policy, when Indian and Chinese immigrants were denied entry to this country and when anti-immigrant exclusion laws and acts of Congress, beginning in 1870 and further in 1882 ,were used to deny them not only legal entry but citizenship also. The sole exclusion to this process occurred when these immigrants were allowed entry- mainly men- in limited numbers to work on special projects. The Chinese worked on building the railroads and the Indians, mainly Sikhs, worked in the California vineyards in the valleys in the late nineteenth century.

Their odyssey was a painful experience and parallels, to some degree, the experience of other non white immigrants and, to a lesser extent, the treatment meted out to African American citizens who were never accorded the full citizenship rights due them under the Constitution. Indeed, the story of Sikhs toiling endlessly and manifesting the true virtues of the migrant ideology and profile- hard work, thrift, perseverance, and endless quest for education- is a hidden story in the history of California immigration.

The tragic story of an Indian immigrant named Bhagat Singh Thind, who served in the US army, was honorably discharged in WW1, and was granted citizenship in Oregon, only to be denied his request for Citizenship by the US Supreme Court. The federal Court in 1910 had earlier declared that Indians were Caucasians, only to have that decision negated by Justice Sutherland ,of the US Supreme Court, who had earlier joined in the Supreme Court's decision, *US v Ozawa*, in which the Court had legally and officially equated “whiteness “ with “Caucasian ancestry”. This new decision now clearly indicated that “whiteness” was a social construct as opposed to a legal one.

Thind, on learning of this negative decision was so socially devastated that he committed suicide. This is one of many historical and sociological narratives that I integrate, often, in my College lectures on Contemporary Immigration to the USA and other cognate courses.

Today, the odyssey and narrative is much different. Against the backdrop of Dalip Singh Samuel who was the first Indian to be elected to the US congress, and the seeming indifference of Indians to political as opposed to economic and educational incorporation, a second generation Indian American, Bobby Jindal, is now Governor of Louisiana, and the darling of reactionary conservatives in the Republican party, and will most likely play a significant role in the upcoming Republican convention. An Indian American, Vikram Pandit heads Citigroup Incorporated, and also heading the US department of Energy's Brookhaven National Laboratory, is noted scientist Dr. Praveen Chaudhari, as examples

of positive vertical mobility in the US society. The poverty rate among Indian immigrants and Indian Americans is extremely low.

Facilitated by the Walter McCarran Act and later 1965 changes to the US immigration code, Indian immigrants have been flocking to the USA, away from England and other diasporic locations, with a slight exception for migrations to Australia and Canada. Statistics culled from the US census, department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration and reported in Migration Policy Institute indicate these facts, inter alia, namely that:

- >There were 1.5 million foreign born from India residing in the USA in 2006.
- >One of every five immigrants of Indian ancestry in the USA was not born in India.
- >More than half of all Indian immigrants resided in just five states, and the size of the population more than doubled in these five states and the District of Columbia between 2000 and 2006.
- >More than a third of all Indian foreign born in the USA arrived in 2000.
- >Men accounted for the majority of the Indian –born population living in the USA in 2006.
- >About three of every four Indian foreign born adults had a bachelor’s degree.
- >Indian men were more likely to participate in the civilian labor force than foreign –born men, overall.
- >Over one-quarter of Indian –born men were employed in information technology occupations.
- >The Indian foreign- born accounted for about 4.2 percent of all lawful permanent residents living in the USA in 2006.
- >Nearly half of the Indian –born lawful permanent resident in 2007 were employment – sponsored immigrants.
- >The Indian born were the fourth-largest group of students and exchange visitors admitted to the USA in 2006.
- >In 2006, 2.3 percent of all unauthorized immigrants in the USA were from India.
- >The number of unauthorized immigrants (illegal immigrants) from India grew faster than any other immigrants’ group between 2000 and 2006.

With the fourth largest foreign born population in the USA after Mexico, the Philippines and China, Indian immigration is alive and well. They present as a vibrant , although not monolithic group, who live the American Dream, and vitiates the American success story as their second and later born populations often outperform US born whites, and many other racial minorities in ascending the educational ladder of success .Sure, they face discrimination, as do many other groups residing in the USA, but what is also clear is that the global success of India and the need for the USA to have a countervailing force against an ascendant China, has led to some interesting power sharing arrangements, including a recent nuclear deal with India which almost led to the parliamentary demise of the current Indian government, and which faced some opposition in the US Senate.

### **The Other Odyssey:**

But, buried within the Indian Immigration in the USA, is another group of diasporic Indians- these from Guyana, Trinidad/Tobago, Kenya, Fiji, Mexico, Bangladesh, the United Kingdom, Canada and Kenya. In 2006, 4 percent of this group (60,267) was born

in Guyana; and 30,134, two percent, were born in Trinidad /Tobago; and these represent the two largest diasporic ancestral Indian populations in the USA.

Foreign –born immigrants from Guyana, as do their counterparts in Trinidad/Tobago and other Caribbean nations, follow a process of what is described as “chain migration” namely migration where there are already other immigrant settlers from their sending societies. For Guyanese as a whole the five states, in descending order, with the largest migrant cohorts are -New York, New Jersey, Florida, Maryland and California. Indo-Guyanese is found more frequently in New York, New Jersey and Florida.

Trinidad and Tobago’s foreign-born immigrants are found, in descending order, in these five states: New York, Florida, New Jersey, Maryland, and Massachusetts; with East Indians found largely in New York, Florida and New Jersey.

Among the “other diasporic Indian” populations however, the interaction with the larger Indian populations is rather limited, spasmodic and low- keyed in nature. Firstly, as a professional colleague of Indian ancestry from Sri Lanka once stated to me thus: “We (Sri-Lankans) view our national identity as more salient than our Indian ancestry.” And, secondly, there is the complication of religion with regard to Hinduism and Islam- the latter being a more inclusive religion than is Hinduism.

Guyanese and Trinidadian Indians who practice their faith, often do so among themselves in their residential enclaves that they inhabit, as Indian from the sub continent often do not reside in their geographic space. Indeed ,the residential patterns of Indo Guyanese and Afro Guyanese in America often mirror the historic residential segregation that occurs in the sending societies, but less so for the Trinidadian population. Some social scientists would contend that Creolization and Hinduization are potent explanatory variables in comprehending this phenomena, even as there are increasing movements among Guyanese and Trinidadian Indian Hindu segments for greater cultural ties with their original historical, but nostalgic , homelands

### **The Changing International Implications:**

As indicated earlier the USA, for global and strategic reasons, is making alliances with an emerging India. These alliances may vary somewhat contingent on who is the next President of the USA –Obama or McCain- and also which political party controls the Senate, hopefully with a veto proof majority.

But there are other international moves by India, largely in the footsteps of China, which, in its quest for superpower status and to fulfill the growing demands of an urban population, have made tremendous investments in the nations of Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, where some of their Diasporas reside.

Writing in the Yale Global online magazine earlier this month Lora Hortal, an Asian security analyst based in Beijing ,and trained in Australia ,and the Defense and Strategic Institute in Singapore , states categorically that India is investing heavily in Caribbean nations , building infrastructure in exchange for the opportunity to purchase natural resources. He points out, further, that most Indian firms are from the private sector while Chinese investments often require the approval of the government.

As an example , Hortal shows how in the oil rich nation of Trinidad and Tobago, India has emerged as one of the major economic and political players , and that by the end of 2007, Indian companies had invested \$3.4 billion in various projects across a the entire spectrum of the economy.. Although he admits that the Chinese investment is far greater

than India's, he contends that India is determined to ratchet up its presence in the Caribbean.

Indian companies and the government of India, he states, has helped Caricom Organization, to the tune of \$1.3 million; won major irrigation and infra structure contracts in Jamaica, Guyana and Surinam; while building cricket stadiums in Guyana and Barbados.

From negotiating for oil companies, mining, partnering in ethanol ventures, to revitalizing a weakened sugar industry, Indian presence is a growing and formidable one, as a counterbalance to China's.

Hortal strategically states that there may be a direct connection with the presence of a sizeable Indian Diaspora in the Caribbean- especially in Guyana and Trinidad /Tobago. He states: "The fact that ethnic Indians constitute significant proportions of the population of some Caribbean nations, has facilitated Indian investment and fostered close political ties. It's perhaps no coincidence that Indian companies have been most successful in Trinidad/Tobago, where Indians account for 40 percent of the population; Guyana where they account for 51 percent; and Surinam, 31 percent."

Hortal ends by noting that Indian investment, although lagging somewhat behind China's, may have a strategic long term advantage in that it is largely private as opposed to China's, and not tied to the government's political strategic or other proclivities, which could change.

In an interesting political angle, and against the backdrop of rising crime ,narco trafficking , kidnappings and charges of "ethnic cleansing" in Guyana and Trinidad/Tobago, both governments have in varying degrees called upon Canada, the USA, the United Kingdom and India, among others, to help them in various ways with the ever rising crime rates. However, in ethnically charged Guyana, with claims of political illegitimacy and rampant favoritism by some members of the opposition, some western intelligence operatives and some in diplomatic circles feel that the role of the Indian government should be carefully calibrated and objective in its application, lest it contributes to a worsening of the social situation in that micro nation state. It is a situation carefully monitored by some political elements in the USA and by segments of the diasporic community.

What a far cry from the odyssey described by Professor Dabydeen and the struggles and travails of the early Punjabis and Sikhs in a xenophobic America.

Today the Coolie Odyssey, although far from complete, certainly seems headed in the right direction.