

India and its Diaspora in the Netherlands

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The first Dutchman to arrive in India was Jan Huyghen van Linschoten. He sailed for India on 8 April 1583 from Lisabon and arrived in Goa on 21 September 1583. After him many followed. The first agreement between the Dutch and Indian rulers appears to be the one signed between the Dutch East India Company and the ruler of Calicut signed in November 1604. There were academic contacts between The Netherlands and India during the British rule. Sanskrit was taught at Leiden University as far back as 1865.

There is no record showing that Indians visited or came to the Netherlands during the period of VOC. It is difficult to determine when the Indians started their emigration to the Netherlands. The first recorded arrival from India in the Netherlands was not of any Indian but of a baby rhino captured in Assam. On 22nd July 1741 it landed at the port of Rotterdam.

During the World War II India soldiers of the British army were captured by the Germans. In collaboration with Netaji Subash Chandra Bose Hitler raised from these captured soldiers the so-called 'Azad Hind Brigade'. Between May and September 1943, a brigade of 3,000 Sikh soldiers was deployed by the Germans on Holland's North Sea coast. The entire Brigade was then transferred to southern France. In 1945 they were captured by the Americans in France and repatriated to India as prisoner of war.

At present The Netherlands has the second largest population of people of Indian origin in Europe. There are two very distinct groups among the Indian Diaspora community in the Netherlands: the People of Indian origin (PIO) community from Surinam whose roots are mainly in UP and Bihar and the Non-Resident Indians (NRI) who came directly from India.

Most Hindustanis from Surinam whose forefathers came to Surinam under the indenture system migrated to the Netherlands when Surinam became independent in 1975. The mass migration from Surinam to the Netherlands was

due to a combination of fear of political insecurity in the newly independent nation, fear of ethnic persecution and the attraction of economic welfare in the Netherlands and a better future for themselves as well as for their children.

In the early sixties Indian professionals found their ways to the developed West including the Netherlands. Highly qualified professionals and entrepreneurs from the urban middle class largely constitute the recent wave of Indians who came to seek their fortunes in the Netherlands.

The Netherlands has a total population of about 16,3 million, out of which the PIOs (Surinamese Indians) are about 160,000 in number. It is estimated that there are about 15,000 – 20.000 Indians including between 1,500 and 3,000 illegal immigrants. According to the CBS - The Central Database of Statistics Netherlands, at the end of the year 2007, the number of Indian nationals was 5,381 and the number of people of Indian origin (first and second generation Indians including Indians with Dutch and foreign passport) was 16.027. There are also a few political asylum seekers from India. In 1972 during the dictatorship of Idi Amin, a few hundred Indians migrated from Uganda to the Netherlands. In the recent past PIO's from Afghanistan arrived in the Netherlands. There are also PIOs from Guyana, Malaysia, Mauritius, Trinidad, etc. Besides the above, the Dutch have been adopting Indian children more or less on a regular basis. The Surinamese Indians are mostly concentrated in and around the four big cities – Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Utrecht and The Hague. The Hague alone has about 40,000 Surinamese Indians.

The Surinamese Indians in the Netherlands and the NRIs have a common cultural base. Yet there is an unseen barrier among the communities. In spite of their common origin and cultural heritage, the two groups of Indians in the Netherlands have different characteristics and cultural differences. They also differ in the level of their integration with the Dutch society. Due to their colonial past and knowledge of the Dutch language the Surinamese Indians are more integrated in the Dutch society than the Indians. They are also politically involved. Being born and brought up in Surinam they are loyal to their motherland.

The Indians who came directly from India or migrated from other countries to the Netherlands also adapted themselves to the Dutch way of life. But, socio-cultural interaction between the two communities hardly takes place. In her thesis "Contested Equality: Social Relations between Indian and Surinamese Hindus in Amsterdam" Brit Lynnebakke, confirms the existence of this barrier between the NRI and PIO communities.

But both communities do share the age-old customs and traditions and observe them in festivities and bereavements. Even the Indian "arranged marriage" system has not completely lost its popularity within the communities.

The Indian Diaspora of The Netherlands is very conscious of its rich cultural heritage. They are very consciously proud that they belong to one of the oldest continuous civilisations of the world. They take great care to preserve this identity. The rising India, the shining India, the economic miracle of India, the Incredible India has given them a new element to be proud of.

At a time when the government of the Netherlands is implementing very strict immigration rules and introducing various plans to integrate the immigrants in to the Dutch society, the Indian Diaspora is praised for its silent integration into the mainstream Dutch society. Especially the ability to integrate accepting the values and norms of the Dutch society and yet retaining its own identity.

In spite of the fact that the forefathers of the Surinamese Indian community, coming from serf background, were not much educated and did not take any textbooks with them to Surinam, the Surinamese Indians were able to preserve their language, traditions and culture. The descendents of these migrants have a deep and enduring love for India and for values of Indian culture that they have inherited. This was passed on from generation to generation. When they came to The Netherlands they brought this tradition with them. Majority of the PIO being Hindu, in the Netherlands there are several Hindu community schools where religious teachings and Hindi are a compulsory part of the curricula.

There is a strong flow of religious and spiritual teachings from India into The Netherlands. The Surinamese Indians have built temples in different parts of The Netherlands. They have taken the initiative to celebrate Holi in the centre of cities like Amsterdam, The Hague and Rotterdam where Dutch public also participates. During Holi festival, the main water fountain of Rotterdam displays coloured water. Rathytras are organised in cities like Amsterdam, The Hague and Rotterdam. Ramlila is organised at Rotterdam. The Hindu Council Netherlands was started by the different Hindu organisations and represents the Hindu community of The Netherlands. The Dutch government recognises The Hindu Council Netherlands as the only partner in discussions relating to Hinduism in The Netherlands.

For the Sikh community in The Netherlands, Rotterdam, The Hague and Amsterdam each has a gurudwara. Recently another Gurudwara was opened in Almere, another city near Amsterdam.

The cultural and friendship societies play an important role in expanding and facilitating social get-togethers not only between the Indian PIOs/NRIs and the Dutch but also between the new comers to The Netherlands and the old hands who have already settled in this country. There are several organisations which regularly organises lectures and seminars on Vedanta, Advaita, Bhagawad Gita etc. There are more than 200 yoga centres where one can get lessons in yoga. Ayurveda is widely introduced and practiced in The Netherlands.

Dutch theatres are offering their stages to an increasing number of Indian musicians and dancers. Many dance schools have sprung up in various places where one can learn Indian classical dances, folk dances and also the modern Indian dances (Bollywood dances). Dance and music students from the Netherlands visit India to refine their techniques and skills. In the area of Indian classical music lessons can be followed to master the art of vocal music and playing of Indian musical instruments at different World Music Schools. Almost all the well-known Indian classical music and dance artists as well as singers from India visited The Netherlands. Bollywood is in. In the summer of 2005, for a few days Amsterdam was invaded by the Indian film industry with the presentation of the IIFA Awards, the Oscars for Bollywood.

The Hindustani Diaspora in the Netherlands has their own TV and radio stations. There are also several commercial Hindustani radio stations serving the community. It is also a source of information for the community especially for family affairs like birth, death and marriage.

Painters from The Netherlands were not only inspired but were also influenced by Indian art. It is said that some works of the Dutch great master, Rembrandt, were also influenced by India. Rembrandt specialists are of the opinion that about 20-25 sketches of Rembrandt, dating back to the period 1654-56, are copies of Moghul miniature paintings. According to them, it is still unknown how Rembrandt obtained these paintings. Many galleries support the works of Indian artists and sculptors. Some of them organise exhibitions of the works of Indian artists. Some Indian artists of international fame have even chosen to settle in The Netherlands.

Indian restaurants are mushrooming all over The Netherlands. Amsterdam alone has more than 40 Indian restaurants. One should not forget the corner Roti-shops, mainly owned and managed by the Surinamese Indians and also frequented by the Dutch. Lessons in Indian cooking are given at several places in The Netherlands. Indian shops in all major cities and towns are selling Indian fresh vegetables, spices, lentils, Basmati rice and flour and products from 'home'

The expatriate Indians have mixed up loyalties – to India and to their adopted country- the country of residence. What is so extraordinary in our Indian culture or in our history or our motherland that exerts such a strong pull?

If there is an Indian Diaspora in the Netherlands, we must then inquire what makes it "Indian"? What is common to the Indians migrating from different states from India? What is common to the PIOs migrating from Surinam to the Netherlands and the first generation Indians who came directly from India?

The question for the NRIs in the Netherlands, even with a Dutch passport is: which is preferable - complete acceptance of the new home by integration and assimilation, or rather remain aloof and keep a cautious distance? For most of

them English is still the means of communication. Should one enthusiastically thrust oneself into the Dutch society? Or should one remain a guest worker, who has the intention of going back 'home'?

The Surinamese Indians don't have this problem. They know that their forefathers left India and they belong to their present country of residence. As India is the centre of their religion, for the Surinamese Hindus, India has a special meaning. It gives them a special identity. This special identity may be one of the reasons why there are so many Surinamese Indian travel agents looking after the constant flow of travellers from the Netherlands to the religious sites in India.

If one speaks of an Indian Diaspora in the Netherlands, it is because other forces have emerged to cement the widely different elements from India into an "Indian community". This is a combination of "nationalism" which can be translated as patriotism combined with love for the country, its heritage and its culture. They might be the holder of Dutch, English or American passports; they are from the first, second and third generation; but during the flag hoisting ceremony at the Indian Embassy, they all sing very proudly the India's national anthem. Indians in the Diaspora routinely mention Indian civilization with self-assurance that would be both ridiculed and challenged in India itself. It seems one is more easily an Indian abroad than in India.

Neither language nor religion binds the Indian community in the Netherlands together. No matter how they dress or where they were educated or from where they come from: the Tajmahal, the Indian flag, Gandhi, Nehru - their icons - belong to them all. One speaks Bengali, Hindi, Tamil, or any of the Indian languages or one follows one's own faith, but still they preserve their "Indianness" - their "Diasporic Identity". In their heart they are still Indian.

Note: This article is based on two articles. "Cooperation in the Field of Arts and Culture", first published in 1999 in the Commemorative Volume "Fifty Years of Indo-Dutch Cooperation" and "The Indian in them lives on", Overseas Indian, MOIA, May 2006, vol 1, issue nr. 5.

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