

The Indian in them lives on

By Wahid Saleh

It is difficult to determine when Indians started their emigration to the Netherlands. Contact between India and the Netherlands goes back to many centuries. After 1600, the Dutch East India Company took over the spice trade from the Portuguese. There is no record showing that Indians visited or came to the Netherlands during that period.

A Dutch TV programme on Azad Hind Brigade stationed in German-occupied Holland mentioned that a brigade of Sikhs arrived in German-occupied Holland back in June of 1943. This brigade had been formed at the instigation of Netaji Subash Chandra Bose, following a meeting with Hitler. Three thousand of them trained in Dresden and were stationed in the north of the Netherlands. From there, they moved to the south of France.

The emigration of Indians to the Netherlands is actually a post-World War II phenomenon.

At present, the Netherlands has the second largest population of people of Indian origin (PIOs) in Europe. There are two very distinct groups among the Indian community in the Netherlands - the PIOs from Suriname (whose roots are mainly in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar) and the non-resident Indians (NRIs).

Most of the PIOs from Suriname migrated to the Netherlands when Suriname became independent in 1975. Before the independence of Suriname, the main motivation for Hindustanis to migrate to the Netherlands was the increased opportunities of higher education as compared to Suriname. In more recent years, Indians from India have joined them.

The Netherlands has a total population of about 16 million. Out of this, the Surinamese Indians (Sarnami Hindustanis as they call themselves) are about 200,000 in number. It is estimated that there are about 15,000 NRIs, apart from 1,000 or 2,000 illegal immigrants. According to the Central Database of Statistics in Netherlands, at the end of the year 2005, there were 3,745 Indian passport holders and the number of people of Indian origin (first and second generation Indians), including Indians holding passports of other countries was 13,800.

Highly qualified professionals and entrepreneurs largely constitute the recent wave of Indians who came to seek their fortunes in the Netherlands. Many of them have retained Indian citizenship. They have gained considerable expertise in important spheres of economic and professional life.

In 1972, during the dictatorship of Idi Amin, a few hundred Indians migrated from Uganda to the Netherlands. In the recent past, PIOs from Afghanistan arrived in the Netherlands. There are also PIOs from Guyana, Malaysia, Mauritius and Trinidad. 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 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 - at local as well as at national level.

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 Surinamese Indians and Indian communities hardly takes place.

One of the reasons may be the language barrier. Among the NRIs, English is the usual medium of communication while the Surinamese Indians communicate either in Dutch or in Sarnami Hindustani or Sarnami Hindi as spoken in Suriname. Sarnami Hindustani is a blend of Bhojpuri and Awadhi. It has also some influence of Dutch and other languages.

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. Both the communities share cultural programmes of well-known Indian artists of classical music and dance and the regular performances of the Bollywood stars.

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 Suriname to the Netherlands and the first generation Indians who came directly from India? Outside India, the question of the "Indianness or the diasporic identity" of these Indians gets a particular meaning as Indians abroad are supposed to leave their regional, ethnic and linguistic identities except the more general identity of being an Indian.

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

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

The question for 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 remaining aloof and keeping a cautious distance?

The Surinamese Indians don't have this problem. They know that their forefathers left India and they belong to their present country of residence. Being born and brought up in Suriname, they are loyal to their motherland. For the Surinamese Hindus, India has a special meaning. India is the centre of their religion; it gives them a special identity.

It seems one is more easily an Indian abroad than 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 are proud to be Indian.

For them, it is 'Sare jahan se accha Hindustan hamara' (My India is better than the rest of the world). They might be holding Dutch, English or American passports. They may be from the first, second or third generation. But during the flag hoisting ceremony at the Indian Embassy, they all sing very proudly India's national anthem.

The diasporic Indians in the Netherlands appear to know the meaning and contours of religion better than the Indians in India. The same way, they routinely mention Indian civilisation.

To quote Shashi Tharoor, 'NRI' now stands for 'Never Relinquished India'. No matter how we dress or where we were educated or from where we come, the Indian flag, Gandhi, Nehru - our icons - belong to us all. Neither language nor religion binds the Indian community in the Netherlands together. We know that India, being more of a continent in size and diversity, an Urdu-speaking Muslim from Delhi and a Malayalam -speaking Brahmin from Kerala would have even less in common than an Egyptian or someone from Nigeria.

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 hearts, they are still Indian. To quote Vayalar Ravi, Minister for Overseas Indian Affairs, for a member of Indian diaspora, it is not only 'Dil hai Hindustani' but 'demaag vee Hindustani' (Both my heart and soul belong to India).

(The writer is an engineer by profession. After taking early retirement from the Dutch company he was working in, he is now involved in social work and is an active member of the Indian community in the Netherlands.)

http://www.gopio.net/Dutch_Suriname_Indians.htm

This article was first published in Overseas Indian published by MOIA, Issue May 2006.

<http://www.overseasindian.in/pdf/2006/may/english-may06.pdf>



From left: Wahid Saleh, a prominent member of the Indian community in the Netherlands, asking a question during the course of the interaction with Minister Ravi; R. Chander, CEO of the Dutch channel Ohm TV, making a point; and a member of the Surinami Hindustani community voicing a view.