

# Indian Diaspora in Canada: Some realities

Amitava Biswas

[amitavabiswas@ieee.org](mailto:amitavabiswas@ieee.org), <http://www.geocities.com/biswasamitava>

## 1. Motivation behind this note

Being an Indo-Canadian I had participated in the survey<sup>1</sup> organized by Center for the Study of Democracy (CSD) at Queens University, Canada. Seems CSD was attempting to rationalize why Canada should have strategic relationship with India. However I was taken back by the quality and the content of the survey questionnaire. The survey exuded a lack of basic understanding about: Indian diaspora in Canada; situations in India; priorities of Indo-Canadians (new immigrants); priorities of India and Canada itself. Most of the questions in that survey appeared irrelevant and shallow. I had to communicate this note to the overseers of this research in a hope that in future the researchers will do sufficient background research to understand the ground realities before they start a survey. I also hope that this note will also benefit the immigration and labor policy makers and policy influencers in Canada.

## 2. Reality check

Rather than the academic question on whether to have a strategic relationship or not between Canada and India, **more important practical questions are:**

- *How Canada can benefit from this relationship in short and long terms ?*
- *What Canada and India can offer to each other and how this can be realized ?*
- *Is Canada really equipped to derive the possible benefits?*
- *Do Canadians really understand situations in India and her priorities to maintain such relationship ?*

## 3. An assessment

Canada needs high quality, younger workforce to keep the economy going. Whereas India is building its economy and needs higher per capita income and technology to develop its public utilities, service infrastructure for its large population base. India had invested in a good education system and her large population has abundant of quality manpower which are not fully utilized. Excess manpower, need for higher per capita income, and need for technology for public services can be the currencies of negotiation and a basis for meaningful practical Indo-Canadian strategic relationship.

But there are several hurdles in materializing and sustaining such a relationship. Currently Canada is not able to utilize the available skilled immigrants. Moreover, the Indo-Canadian diaspora will have to play an important role in such relationship building. At present the Indo-Canadian community is struggling with its own challenges, as a result, except a few individuals, the rest of the community may not be in a mood to take active part in helping Canada in this relationship building. So unless Canada solves her own internal problems and help her Indo-Canadian citizens and residents, then these promises alone will not justify spending Canadian tax dollars. Similarly a partnership which does not address India's basic needs can not attract any serious interests from India.

---

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=Tij\\_2fq5AftV3qrtlx0czYZA\\_3d\\_3d](http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=Tij_2fq5AftV3qrtlx0czYZA_3d_3d)

### ***3.1 Benefits of immigration are not realized***

**Canadian labor market realities are making the current immigration endeavors ineffective to a large extent.** The basic goal of Canadian immigration was to attract quality skilled labor force to Canada which can contribute in building a skill based industrialized economy. But in that regards, facts portray a rather grim picture. Around 2003-2004, around 120,000 new immigrants landed under the economic class<sup>2</sup> quota, which means they had high quality training, expertise and experience in priority sectors. During the same time 68,900<sup>3</sup> Canadians departed to USA as reported by Statistics Canada. Statistics Canada also reported<sup>4</sup> the followings:

- *Only minority (15%) of the Canadians who leave ever return to Canada.*
- *The rates of leaving are highest among younger age group (25-34 yrs), especially those who live in large cities, have very high income (over \$60,000 per year) and university education.*
- *A new male immigrant is 10 times more likely to leave in the first few years of landing.*

This means around **for every two new qualified immigrants that arrive in Canada, one qualified person will leave for US.** Stories from my own personal networks also **indicate that the highly skilled labor force who can most benefit the Canadian economy, have a tendency to leave.** There are various reasons behind this exodus, and one of them which specially motivate a new immigrant to leave is - **Canadian labor market does not acknowledge capacity, skills and professional abilities of new immigrants.**

For plum positions, Canadian recruiters seem to favor people whom are socially known to the recruiters and/or who are born and brought up in Canada, rather than the one who is professionally more competent. This is further exacerbated by an average Canadian recruiter's lack of knowledge, training, professional capacity and confidence to assess candidates who come from a different social, educational and professional background. Another social undercurrent which adversely affects the situation is, Canadians tend to give precedence to social relationships (favor candidate who is part of their network) over business concerns or professional capacities of workers, so new immigrants who lack the social network and knowledge about the Canadian society are disadvantaged. Such lack of opportunity hampers their professional growth and integration, resulting in a chicken-egg problem.

As a result often skilled professionals are forced to work in assignments that are far below their skill levels or expectations. This creates a disillusionment and resentment among the high skilled immigrants. The ones who are resourceful enough, find attractive opportunities in US, where they are readily acknowledged. This situation is getting noticed by the qualified potential immigrants in India, so many of them are getting discouraged to immigrate to Canada. As this immigration policy and labor market reality combination is producing a very poor result, so I assert that till Canada gets its house in order she is not ready or equipped to benefit from this kind of strategic relationship.

### ***3.2 Canadians are largely unaware about Indians and the level of professional competencies***

Poor awareness about Indians in Canada: India is a country of dichotomy, poverty and under-development co-exists with a significantly large population of English speaking, highly educated, skilled

---

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.usacanadavisa.com/statsfall2003.asp>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.statcan.ca/Daily/English/080313/d080313c.htm>

<sup>4</sup> [www.statcan.ca/english/research/11F0019MIE/11F0019MIE2006288.pdf](http://www.statcan.ca/english/research/11F0019MIE/11F0019MIE2006288.pdf)

population in contrast to situations in other developing countries. It is to be noted India is a country which has an extremely successful space program and have developed indigenous super computers. The Indian education system works on basis of merit and competition alone which is unparalleled in the world<sup>5</sup>, Indian Universities like Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Indian Institute of Management (IIM) and Regional Engineering Institutes/Colleges (REC) selects students on basis of stringent written test scores and admits only 1 out of 150 candidates (**less than 1%**) who have high school education. Many of the Indian universities have standards that are comparable to top US universities like Harvard and Stanford<sup>6</sup> and some of them are considered to be “the most difficult to get into school system” in the world. Similarly Indian business employs people based on their professional qualifications and not based on their social or networking skills. A top layer of this kind of qualified people who have atleast 4 years of work experience immigrate to Canada (thanks to the immigration regulations). Most of these people were doing very well professionally in India because they were the best among their peers, however they immigrated to Canada not because they don't get any professional opportunities in their native land (unlike other nationalities) but they had hopes to grow further in a developed country like Canada.

**Thus Indians who immigrate are a different breed of people compared to an average Indian or an average native Canadian. The Indians who immigrate to Canada are highly qualified people who have high degree of expectation and intellectual capacity.** These barriers in Canadian workplace naturally take them by surprise.

Lack of sensitivity about Indians in India: Being citizens of a developed country all Canadians have their basic needs satisfied, and they are privileged enough to have genuine higher level concerns and motivations like peace and development of harmonious relationships with other countries. But they are not tuned to the harsh grass root level realities in the developing countries like India. An average Indian's priority is income and physical security (food, housing, basic amenities) rather than higher level needs like peace and social relationships across the border. Being born and brought up in such a context, members of Indian immigrant community have a similar social value system and personal expectations which do not exactly match with the Canadian value system or personal priorities. This itself is a key barrier to the social integration. Indian government is similarly focused on these basic issues and thus diplomatic relationship alone will not be a priority for India unless that can realize real and immediate benefits for the Indian masses. Trying to negotiate on non priority issues directly, for example nuclear proliferation, will not yield any ground.

---

<sup>5</sup> US heaps praise on IITs, <http://www.rediff.com/money/2005/may/20iit1.htm>

<sup>6</sup> IITs must be known for what they stand for', <http://www.rediff.com/money/2005/may/21iit1.htm> ,

"This is IIT Bombay. Put Harvard, MIT and Princeton together, and you begin to get an idea of the status of this school in India." (Lesley Stahl, co-anchor on CBS 60 Minutes)

"And it's hard to think of anything like IIT anywhere in the world. It is a very unique institution." (Bill Gates, Microsoft)

IITs better than US institutes, says CBS, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/34701392.cms>

### ***3.3 Lack of partnership between Canadian and Indian technology businesses***

The lack of knowledge, business and professional skills in part of Canadian recruiters that have created entry barriers for qualified immigrants also similarly discourage Indian technology business to foster any serious partnership with Canadian technology related or technology consuming businesses. As a result except one or two, most of the Indian technology companies that seem to operate in Canada, do not actually consider Canadian market to be interesting enough to even maintain a physical office in Canada. On the contrast US business are quite open to forge business relationships with Indian business, as a result the US economy has benefited tremendously in terms of cheap software technology and services from India (around 60% of all software in US and world actually gets made by Indian workers in India) in last 20 years. **On the otherhand Canada have fallen behind in competitiveness in these sectors and do not benefit from cheap technologies and associated economic developments.** In 2000, Canada ranked as the second best country<sup>7</sup> to live in, in 2007 Canada fell down to the sixth position in few years. **So the question is how Canada will stand to benefit from India, if its private sector is unwilling to rise upto the mark, open its minds and its doors to benefit itself and Canada ?**

### ***3.4 Apparent lack of strong fundamentals regarding trade between India and Canada***

Questions regarding the fundamentals that may support reciprocal trade are economic in nature like: How can Canada sell technologies to India when the dollar to rupee exchange rate pose a formidable hurdle and when Canada has already begun loosing her competitiveness in manufacturing sector ? Similarly from India's perspective a valid question is - in what way Canadian marketplace is attractive to India, especially when Indian business could not make a headway in Canadian market ? Seems Canada and India are in fact competitors for the US market place in many sectors like software and call center business. In future that might include automobiles.

### ***3.5 Contrasting Canada to US and Europe***

Indian contribution in US: It is not that Indian professionals are deficient. Facts indicate otherwise, Indian community is the economically most successful immigrant community<sup>8</sup> in US. Indians in US hold the largest portion of computer related technology and a significant portion of other professional jobs<sup>9</sup> in medicine and finance. They are well acknowledged and respected, they get more opportunities, they are professionally very successful, and they have begun taking active part in the political processes in US as well. Acceptance by labor market was perhaps the single most important factor behind their sense of security, their integration to US society and their reciprocal contribution to the nation building process in US.

Indian experience with European market: India found European markets to be quite attractive in terms of software services. Most of the major Indian firms have offices there and are doing brisk business which is benefiting both India and their European clients.

---

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.thecanadapage.org/Canada2000.htm>

<sup>8</sup> OVERSEAS INDIANS MAKE IT BIG: They are the richest foreign-born group in the U.S., own 60% of all small retail stores in Britain, and account for a tenth of Hong Kong's exports.  
[http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/fortune\\_archive/1993/11/15/78590/index.htm](http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/fortune_archive/1993/11/15/78590/index.htm)

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.iacfpa.org/p\\_news/nit/iacpa-archieve/2004/11/12/ele19-12112004.shtml](http://www.iacfpa.org/p_news/nit/iacpa-archieve/2004/11/12/ele19-12112004.shtml)

### ***3.6 Situation of Indo-Canadians***

The Indian community is yet to establish itself firmly and confidently in Canada. At the grass roots levels, the new Indian immigrant community is currently extremely unsatisfied and un-invested in Canada. This is primarily due to lack of professional opportunities in Canada as mentioned earlier. By large the crème de-la crème of the Indian diaspora have the tendency to move to US. A change in immigration policy (like delayed citizenship) will not solve that, it will only make Canada further unattractive to this group of workers. Whereas to derive an adequate understanding about all the challenges that new generation of Indian immigrants are facing, or about the current situations in India, it is more appropriate to get feedback from the new Indo-Canadians rather than those who have settled down in Canada for a longer time.

## **4. Conclusion**

Theoretically speaking India and Canada have reciprocal needs and resources. But the concern is whether Canada can actually assimilate Indian resources and benefit, given her tendency to underutilize her own native and immigrant workforce. This is because native Canadians are largely unaware about the backgrounds and potentials of skilled Indian immigrants. This has created significant barriers for skilled Indian immigrants to contribute to the Canadian economy, nation building and integration with Canadian society. The lack of professional growth and satisfaction has caused under-currents of resentments, their lack of investment in the Canadian society and their brain drain from Canada. In software technology sector where India is a formidable power, Canada has failed to forge a partnership with India due to entry barriers for Indian businesses in Canada. When competitiveness of Canadian manufacturing sector eroding, Canada does not appear to be an attractive trade partner to India. So until Canada puts her house in order and creatively define a partnership proposal, she can neither benefit herself nor attract Indian attention.

### **About myself**

I became a Canadian citizen in 2007. I am a practicing technologist and management professional. I have worked for nine years in telecom, electronics, and computer software industry in various roles: as an engineer, business manager and a business functional expert. As part time faculty, I had taught at graduate level for three years in management institutes and universities in India. I have a Bachelors of Engineering degree from Indian Institute of Technology in Electronics & Telecommunication Engineering, MBA (major in Finance and Marketing) from Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad, Masters in Computer Engineering from Concordia University, Montreal. At present I am pursuing PhD in Computer Science at Texas A&M University, US. I have some research publications in engineering and management. I am a certified Information System Professional in Canada. I am interested in economics, society, environment, basic sciences and technology. I mentor new and prospective Canadian immigrants. In past I have volunteered for non-profit organizations like Oxfam and BAIF in India and Global Action Network in Canada, and have spent significant amounts of time in rural India. I was one of the organizers of the North American Regional Conference of IIT Alumni 2006, which brought Indians and Canadians together in Toronto in a hope that some partnerships might develop between Canadian and Indian businesses and workforce.