

FOREWORD

The story of the Indian Diaspora is fascinating. Actually, it is cinematic in its scope. In this story, you can find tumultuous heart-break and unbridled joy. There is breathtaking romance. Men and women of the Indian Diaspora have led nations, and continue to do so, powerfully. Some have also toppled from the slippery slopes of power. Frontiers of science, technology and learning have been repeatedly pushed and challenged. The charts of economic stardom have been busted with elan. The bars of tolerance have been raised, and often enough. The menace of apartheid has been fought, sometimes from inside prison. Inspiring freedom movements have been scripted. The fruits of success have been savoured. The meeting of great minds has taken place at different corners of the planet. And so much more.

All at once, it is a story of the jalebi shop owner in South Hall, the tailoring store entrepreneur in Hong Kong, the automobile engineer in Detroit, the scientist at NASA, the President in Mauritius and the Prime Minister in Trinidad and Tobago. And 28 million such stories. It is also a fascinating connect between all of them through their Indian identity and a need somewhere to strike a bond with their ancestral land.

This story of the Indian Diaspora has many a heartrending episode that encapsulates the struggle of the earliest emigrants to foreign shores. Some were lured by agents who promised a future that would be written in gold. Many of the lured that rushed to ports in erstwhile Calcutta, Madras, Pondicherry and Bombay (now Kolkata, Chennai, Puducherry and Mumbai) to sail away did not know that they would be for ever gone. Others sailed away willfully to escape a life of poverty and hardship and into the winds of unknown possibilities.

A few left voluntarily with some money to find their enterprise. Willfully, voluntarily or beguiled, they all had to endure long, perilous journeys across the choppy seas. Some of the grueling voyages lasted over four months. It wasn't prosperity that they walked out into on the other side—instead they stepped on to shores where life would be just as hard, unrelenting, and bonded. But there was no man-enforced starvation, only a little more money, and sometimes even a little more dignity. Through hard toil in tropical sugarcane fields and rubber plantations, or in the laying of railway lines, the majority had found their destiny.

Many of the descendants of the earliest immigrants who sailed away to faraway destinations such as Demerara (presently Guyana), Trinidad and Tobago, Suriname, Fiji, Mauritius, Reunion Islands, Guadeloupe, South Africa, Malaysia, East Africa (now divided between Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda) have done quite well. They participated in freedom movements and have risen not only to positions of Presidents and Prime Ministers, but have also now become part of the economic growth story in their adopted lands.

At the other end of the cinematic spectrum are stories of great fortitude and valour, of great breakthroughs in science and research, of accumulation of fabulous wealth by the modern immigrant who mostly left India post 1960 with few dollars in his pocket. Asian Indians are by far the most prosperous ethnic group in the USA. The richest man in the U.K. is an Indian. Punjabi is the fourth-most spoken language in Canada, Tamil an official one in Singapore, and one hopes Bhojpuri will acquire an official status in Mauritius, some day.

Somewhere between the stories of heart-rending tribulations and the joyous episodes of wealth creation are tales of academic success, great discoveries, noteworthy literary, cinematic and musical accomplishments and sporting stardom. Many Little or Mini Indias have come up worldwide. Each one of these has a bit of history behind it. These pockets of Indian boroughs are made up of both the descendants of the earlier emigrants who left the shores of India over 150 years ago, as well as the more recent immigrants who migrated 50 or less years back. We have highlighted some of these boroughs for you.

To get a grip of this vast diversity, multiplicity of languages and cultures, in order to understand the specific issues that confront Indian immigrants in each region, an overseeing global body had to come in place.

That is exactly how it panned out—in 1989, the Global Organization of People of Indian Origin (GOPIO) was formed. Today, nearly 23 years later, the GOPIO has established itself into one of the most accomplished and credible Diaspora organizations in the world. The GOPIO has reached out to Indians far and wide, across continents, and is creating a special bond of friendship among Indians drawn to a common cause—of being of help and use to their ancestral land and to each other.

GOPIO's works has led to recognition worldwide, the most salient of which has come from the Indian Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh himself. "GOPIO has emerged as a leading organization providing a unique platform to the vast Indian Overseas community for promoting their interests and realizing their aspirations. It has contributed significantly to the process of engagement between the Government of India and the Indian Diaspora. The bonds between the motherland and people of Indian origin across the globe are valuable and precious. It is my hope that they will continue to flourish."

The stories of GOPIO are representative of the Diaspora's success, and resilience. This is also reflective of India's resilience itself—an India that has conquered hearts and minds without having to send soldiers to conquer lands. Within the GOPIO membership and echelons are stories of the descendants of the indentured workers who had to first free themselves of the shackles of colonialism before they could make their way up from tough, even hostile, conditions. There are also stories of the modern day immigrants who put their skills, ingenuity and enterprise to good use in free nations, and were able to scale the mountains of success.

The idea of the book first came from Mr Inder Singh, Chairman of GOPIO International, and someone very keen to document history as it unfolds. The idea was shared with Past Chairman Dr Thomas Abraham and President Mr Ashook Ramsaran, and the seeds of the book were sown. In all about 200 life members and 70 chapters worldwide were invited to be a part of the book. Not all could come forward, but to the ones who did, a special word of Thanks.

In this story of the Global Indian Diaspora, we hope that you'll connect with the many examples that have been illustrated. We also hope that you'll feel that it is a great time to imbibe the Universal Spirit while continuing to practice an ancient Indian philosophy, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam—the whole world is but one family.

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