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Diaspora vis-à-vis Cultural Heritage: A Case of Indians in Canada

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Abstract:

The present paper examines the historical and contemporary context of Indian communities in Canada from a cultural heritage perspective and analyses the processes of migration, settlement and cultural identity. It also examines the challenges of developing museum exhibits which depict the Indian Diaspora in Canada. Despite its colourful history and its growing size and prominence in Canadian society, the Indian Diaspora has not been the subject of much interest by Canadian museums. While recognising the necessity of working with local communities and thereby reflecting local concerns, it is submitted that any museum exhibit attempting to portray the complex set of experiences of the Indian Diaspora in Canada should include some portrayal of the highly marginalized position which the Indian community faced when it first established themselves in the early 1900s. In addition to this historical focus, any attempt to portray the contemporary Indian Diaspora needs to portray its growing diversity and its efforts to maintain, and in many cases modify and ‘hybridise’, cultural practices. Such a display would also have to reflect the influence of transnational forces on the contemporary Indian Diaspora. Ultimately, efforts by museums to develop exhibits reflecting the Indian presence in Canada will only further the aims of its widely praised state policy of multiculturalism.

Keywords: Diaspora, Cultural heritage, Indo-Canadians, Multiculturalism

Introduction

What does it mean to be Indo-Canadian? It has been a challenging question for a long time. In fact, Indo-Canadians are Canadians whose origins trace back to India. The terms East Indian and South Asian are used to distinguish people of ancestral origin from India, from the First Nations peoples of Canada who are often referred to as Indian. Most Canadians of Indian origin prefer, and many times will refer to themselves as, “Indian”, rather than “East Indian”. According to Statistics Canada in 2006, there were 962,665 people who consider themselves as being Indo-Canadians.

The major concern of Indo-Canadians is of their identity. Are their values and beliefs obtained from their parents, or they come from the Canadian culture that they are exposed to and a part of on a daily basis? Many second generation Indo-Canadians young people are faced with the same

struggles and questions about their identity and sense of belonging. Are they Indian, Canadian, or Indo-Canadian? They may feel they have two cultures which do not blend together easily. New Indian immigrants to Canada are often firmly rooted in their religion and culture and are sure of their personal identities. However, the children of these immigrants are less sure of their personal and social identities. The second generation of Indo-Canadians is more likely to question values and beliefs. They more commonly struggle with their sense of self and possibly suffer from culture clash.

The Indo-Canadian community started around the beginning of the twentieth century. The pioneers were men, mostly Sikhs from the Punjab upon retiring from the army, some of these men found their pensions to be inadequate; it was dangerous in India or else their lands in the clutches of money-lenders. They decided to try their fortunes in the countries they had visited. They joined the Indian Diaspora. They started small businesses of their own or drove taxis. These were modest beginnings but they had bigger ideas. The Sikhs, who had seen Canada, recommended the New World to fellow Sikh people who were in a position to venture out and seek new fortunes.

However, upon arrival to British Columbia, the first Sikh immigrants faced widespread racism by the local white Canadians. Most of the white Canadians feared workers who desired less pay, and that an influx of more immigrants would threaten their jobs. As a result there were a series of race riots that targeted the Sikh immigrants, who were beat up by mobs of angry white Canadians. From the social pressure most decided to return back to India, while a few stayed behind.

Indian Diaspora in Canada

Between Canada, the UK, and the US, the latter ranks first in terms of the number of Indian Diaspora but last in terms of percentage of total population; inversely, Canada's Indian Diaspora population is among the highest in terms of percentage of overall population. In fact, Canada occupies an even higher rank in this regard than South Africa, to which Indians began emigrating much earlier.

The Indian Diaspora is fractured along provincial and linguistic lines, and there is not much connectivity between Indo-Canadian organizations across provinces in Canada, but the Indian Diaspora overall is known to be keen for two-way trade and investment. The Indian Diaspora in Canada has limited influence in India, unlike the US Diaspora. The growing population of Indo-Canadians now numbers 1 million, many of whom share the values and common interests of both countries. Indo-Canadians are a conduit between the two nations; this study is intended to explore the potential of this Diaspora to build partnerships between India and Canada. The discussions provide useful insights and perspectives from the Indian point of view, with considerable interest in India's economic and social development as well Canadian perspectives on the current role of the Indian Diaspora in building bridges of understanding within

international business, knowledge networks, and epistemic communities between these two important democracies.

Indo-Canadians represent a diversity in culture, as well as diversity in religion and language. Groups with differing ethnic and religious backgrounds have divergent cultural practices. Indo-Canadian community is fairly diverse in terms of their ethnic, linguistic, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds. However, despite the heterogeneity, the Indian Diaspora in Canada has many commonalities across its sub-ethnic groups (Maharaj, 2003). For instance, they all indicate the value of family, the presentation of sharply defined family and a priority of family interests. They also share common traditions of decoration, cooking, clothing, etc despite having diversity in culture, religion and language.

Cultural Heritage of Indo-Canadians through Museum Exhibits

Cultural heritage of Indo-Canadians through museum exhibits will make a way to showcase and promote the understanding of the history, civilization, diversity and cultural heritage of Canadians whose ancestry originates from India. Museum exhibits will bestow to Canadians a treasure of astounding ancient Indian (Vedic) art and architecture. The traditional courtyard styled Haveli building, with its hundreds of hand-carved wooden peacocks, lotus flowers and royal elephants will welcome visitors into a magnificent auditorium designed free of pillars. The Mandir- museum building, with its intricately hand-carved marble and lime stone will create a heavenly structure of pillars, pinnacles and domes could add to the magnificent beauty of the museum exhibits. In fact, this will become a major tourist attraction for people of all cultures. It will be the largest initiative of its kind ever undertaken by the Indo-Canadian community in Canada; a historic and proud achievement for all Canadians.

The traditional Vedic architectural form of the Museum will allow visitors to experience the Indo-Canadians culture and heritage in a first-hand visceral way. Visitors will literally walk through an authentically styled ancient building whose construction is based on centuries-old practices and techniques. The museum building itself will become part of the story of indo-Canadian heritage. For Indo-Canadians themselves, the museum will also serve as a reflection of their own people's journey to Canada and their contributions to Canada. The museum exhibits should have the following activities:

- Through expressing the theme of 'Unity in Diversity', the Centre should facilitate the understanding of Indo-Canadian heritage, its history and philosophy, its pluralistic, familial and spiritual values and its adaptable coexistence.
- To reach out to all Canadians by showcasing and promoting the understanding of the Indo-Canadian communities' culture, heritage and civilizations.
- To display, exhibit and educate an understanding of the origins, the history, and the values of the cultural heritage of Indo-Canadians and, to inspire visitors to appreciate

how it has contributed to the fields of art, architecture, science, democracy, education, culture, pluralism and spiritual values.

- The museum should create pride for first generation Indo-Canadians through a greater understanding and awareness of their roots. It will communicate to visitors how a distinct ethnic community made its way to Canada and established itself as a vibrant part of Canada's large multi-cultural mosaic.
- The museum should aim to promote greater cultural exchanges and understanding between Canada and India; the architectural, cultural and spiritual components of the project will also greatly increase the understanding and harmony between both cultures.
- To enhance the understanding of religious diversity, to showcase the “pluralism” values of the Indo-Canadian heritage. It will also reflect the harmony in the people and help in building cultural bridges.

Key Themes for Museum Exhibits

Museum exhibits should also feature the following key themes:

The History of Indo-Canadians

- The various facets of the indo-Canadian society
- Indo-Canadian history and migration
- Contributions to the multicultural society of Canada

The Uniqueness of Indo-Canadian Cultural Heritage

- The many faces of India – the land, the people, the art and culture
- Language - Sanskrit, the most ancient language
- Education – world’s first university in India, Takshashila

Contributions to Various Fields

- Mathematics – zero, geometry, decimal system, algebra
- Science – astronomy, measure of time, law of gravity, particle physics, chemistry
- Medicine – ayurveda for natural health
- Art & Architecture – temples, palaces, monuments
- Music and Dance – classical music, dances of the diasporas

Democracy

The world’s oldest and largest democracy with one of the world’s most diverse peoples living together, with a vast variety of cultures

Literature

The oldest scriptures and philosophies, the Vedas, Puranas, Upanishads, Ramayana, Mahabharata, Bhagwad Gita

Indian Philosophies of Pluralism

- Harmony of the world – “The whole world is one family” – Hitopadesha
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- Respect for all – Vachanamrut
- Welcoming the ideas of all Cultures – “Let noble thoughts come to us from all directions” – Rigveda
- Care for humanity – “The whole world is one nest” – Atharvaveda
- Spirituality, great philosophies, meditation and yoga – Shrimad Bhagawat Gita

Messages to Humanity

- Unity in Diversity
- Care for nature – “Let us share and enjoy together” – Kathopanishad

Building up a Cultural Bridge through Museum Exhibits

The museum exhibits of cultural heritage of Indo-Canadians will be an initiative towards building up a cultural bridge between the two nations. To bridge the gap, focus has to be made on increasing the exposure and understanding of the Indo-Canadian communities' culture, heritage and civilizations to all Canadians of all ages.

Conclusion

To conclude, the creation of permanent national museums in Canada will be a unique architectural setting, displaying the cultural, social, artistic, pluralistic, and spiritual heritage of the Indian Diaspora. It will enable us to strengthen our friendship and to convey our respect for and harmony with all Canadian communities. This is in keeping with the timeless adage of the Vedas “Vasudhaiva kutumbakam – the whole word is one family”. Based on a theme of “unity in Diversity”, the museum will showcase the history and culture of the Indo-Canadian Diaspora with an aim to educate all Canadians through creative and visually stunning exhibits. It will have great importance for all Canadians, and will be a national education and exhibition site for schools and visitors throughout North America. It will elaborate on the glorious, colorful Indo-Canadian heritage and living civilization tracing its origins, from ancient times, to its role in today's contemporary society.

In fact, Indo-Canadians provide an important node in a global network of Indian Diasporas. They have social and economic links with their home country as well as Canada. This attribute demonstrates the significant role that Indo-Canadians can play at political, social, cultural and economic level nationally and internationally.

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